NARROWING ATTAINMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT GAPS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THIRD GRADE STUDENTS THROUGH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

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Narrowing Attainment and Achievement Gaps of African American Third Grade Students Through Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Date Approved: August 31, 2020
Narrowing Attainment and Achievement Gaps of African American Third Grade Students

Through Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of
Doctor of Education

National Louis University
2020
Abstract

Literature suggest culturally responsive teaching is one of our most powerful tools for accelerating student learning and helping students find their way out of the gap. Billions of dollars have been invested in creating educational equity, but the data have shown that inequality in achievement still exists. However, school districts are beginning to focus more on being aware of and sensitive to the cultural and social needs of African American students. When school communities accept the challenge of changing the culture within their schools to ensure all students reach their full potential, then the achievement gap can be eradicated. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine teachers’ perceptions toward culturally responsive teaching strategies and its impact on the attainment and achievement gap of African American third grade students. The context of this inquiry is a large public school district that incorporates culturally responsive teaching across the district. My study demonstrates qualitative data that match current research and outcomes of best practices in teaching, positive strategies to promote student academic success, and increased cultural competence among stakeholders.
Preface

As a former elementary school teacher and a mother of three, I am an advocate for academic achievement. I believe researching the effects of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) will inform possible ways to improve the teaching and learning of African American students. I believe classroom teachers and the school community can have a positive impact on the academic achievement of all students. I wanted to study whether culturally responsive teaching strategies were a critical component of academic achievement, specifically for African American students. I believe in the benefits that implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies provide to student academic achievement. I believe understanding the culture of African American students plays a vital role in narrowing the attainment and achievement gap and I advocate for the implementation of CRT in all schools across all districts.

In November of 2017, I became an assistant principal at an elementary school. I analyzed school-wide data and was tasked with implementing processes and procedures to improve the academic achievement of all subgroups. I had a professional responsibility to study the relationships between teachers and students and the impact those relationships could have on academic achievement, specifically relating to the achievement gap. I hoped findings from this research could serve as a road map for schools and school districts when implementing strategies to improve academic achievement.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband and children for their unconditional love, faith, and support throughout this challenging, but rewarding journey. Obtaining my doctorate degree was a personal goal and I will forever be grateful for all each of you have been to me and for giving me your complete blessing and prayers ensuring I finished the race! You all are my Rock Stars and I love you! To Dr. Coffin and Dr. Sparks: you two have been absolutely amazing during my transition to National Louis University. I am grateful for your steadfast support and encouragement.
Acknowledgements

First, giving honor to God: The constant grace, mercy, and favor got me through the trials and tribulations of this process. As the songs says, “Never would have made it without You”.

My husband, Garrett Proctor, Jr.: Your constant words of encouragement inspired me to remain steadfast during this process. You never complained when I had to spend countless days and nights in front of the computer. You believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself. Your patience is remarkable and inspiring. Thank you for being my rock. You are amazing and I love you.

My children, Darielle, Christopher, and Christian: Anytime I felt like the workload was heavy; your simple words of “You got this!” kept me in the race. I love you all to the moon and back. Remember, it is not how you start, but how you finish. Wake up every morning and put one foot in front of the other, remembering the battle isn’t yours. Always remember Proverbs 3:5-7. I have dedicated this to you because I want you to know that “All things are possible with God” and a little faith and perseverance.

My grandchildren, Caiden and Kai’ler: Remember that education is the key. It is the one thing that no one can take from you. Dream and dream big. Put God first in the pursuit of your dreams and stay the course. Me-ma loves you more than words can express.

My son-in-law, Warren (Walter) Flounory: You silently encouraged me with your words of “Dr. Proctor”, so thank you. As I tell you all the time; you are an amazing dad – stay the course.

My dad, George Gomillion, Jr. and all my extraordinary siblings (too many to name): Thank you for pushing me and always telling me how proud you were. You all have been riding with me on every new step of my educational journey.
My additional friends and family: Thank you for helping and guiding me through this process with words of encouragement, advice, feedback, resources, time, and talents. You all helped make this possible. Lastly, to the study participants, thank you for your willingness to give up your time to help me achieve my goal.
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Section One: Introduction and Purpose of the Study

The following is a vignette of my personal experience as a fourth-grade teacher. It was my first year and it set the tone of teaching and learning for me.

I had a student who was promoted to fourth grade for good cause. His good cause for promotion was he was retained in third grade twice and could not be retained again. He was not able to pass the State Comprehensive Assessment Test (SCAT), which was required of third grade students at the time.

Furthermore, he was not able to pass the required number of reading portfolio assessments, which was an alternative for promotion. I initially believed that his lack of enthusiasm for reading and his lack of desire to participate in any activity related to reading was the cause of his feelings of inferiority to the other students he saw fully engaged in a variety of reading tasks.

During a moment of conferring I spoke with him about his interests and things he enjoyed personally. I learned he was passionate about many things but had very little exposure to the things he loved. In addition, I learned he was never taught to use his mind well. He did not know how to process information effectively or do analytical reading. At that moment I realized he was a dependent learner and needed various supports to grow into an independent thinker and learner. I concluded he felt inferior to the other students because he did not have the skills necessary for self-reliance. This student became my first hands-on experience with the racial achievement gap.

Core instruction and interventions showed the student was unable to be engaged and make meaning of any literary task. As an educator, I knew it was my responsibility to find a way to make connections with what was personally relevant and meaningful to him to help him
acquire knowledge. I wanted to enable the cognitive processing necessary for learning to take place. I was a mother of two young Black boys who also struggled with reading, but I invested time at home to meet them where they were academically and I encouraged productive struggle. Each of my boys needed different strategies and supports to help them be successful academically. One thing they both needed were connections to their learning. I did not want there to be a gap in their learning. Therefore, I found a way to make learning meaningful to them, I set the foundations and set high expectations for them to receive a good education. That year I concluded that I needed to treat every child in my classroom like I treated my own children and give them what they needed to close the gap. I knew I could not single handedly close the gap, but I could do the work to narrow the gap. That was 11 years ago and the racial achievement gap still exists.

According to the 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, Amerson (2014) pointed out the following:

- For 9-year old students in reading, Caucasian students outperformed African American students by 23 points.
- For 13-year old students in reading, Caucasian students outperformed African American students by 23 points.
- For 17-year old students in reading, Caucasian students outperformed African American students by 26 points.

There is a persistent 20+ point gap in the scores of Caucasian students over African American students, which warrants exploration of the underlying causes of the racial achievement gap (p.16).
While the racial achievement gap has been narrowing during those initial 11 years of my career, African American students continue to be a part of the disaggregated group not achieving at the same rate as their Caucasian counterparts. While schools across the nation have had to deal with disparities in student achievement across racial lines for decades, school districts are now faced with greater numbers of students who are not demonstrating success and achievement academically (Morgan, 2018). The achievement gap has been identified as a significant challenge consistently at all education levels and has been an item on the national agenda for quite some time.

The origin of the racial achievement gap is rooted in the history of the United States. Research regarding the history of this achievement gap and discrepancies in educational performance date back to the 19th century (Morgan, 2018). The American history and its relationship with slavery play an immense role in the achievement gap between Caucasians and African Americans. Following the Civil War, many African slaves earned their freedom via war participation. However, their freedom was limited due to the Black Codes. The Black Codes prohibited the teaching of reading and writing to the freed slaves. The Black Codes were followed by “Separate but Equal” via the court case of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), which legalized segregation. Plessy v. Ferguson set the stage for years of inequity in education for children of color (Abram, 2014). As a result, Black schools were often greatly underfunded compared to White schools. The case of Brown v. Board of Education (1954) later determined that separate was not indeed equal. This case convinced the court that even when physical facilities were equal, segregation still deprived minority children of equal educational opportunities.
The decision made by the Supreme Court set the stage for correcting years of educational inequality. Despite the overturning of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, schools in the southern states did not completely integrate racially until the 1970s. The South holds the highest concentration of Black people in the country, which makes it an ideal location to study Black achievement (Abram, 2014). According to Garner (2017),

Nearly 60 years after the *Brown v. Board Education* decision, the achievement gap has emerged as the “greatest civil rights issue of our time. It should be apparent that the quality of school differing for a large period of time coupled with racial oppression would leave behind the achievement gap that we currently face. (p. 28)

The gap emerges before children enter kindergarten and widens over time. The persistent achievement gap has multiple implications for society. Lower future income levels, limited career opportunities, and other negative social outcomes are the result of lower educational outcomes. For this reason, the gap that African American students experience is a pressing issue. It is a pressing issue because until we can level the playing field for African American students, we will never escape the specters of slavery and racism in our country (Garner, 2017).

According to Atkinson (2012), the achievement gap is the first leg of the school-to-prison pipeline for many students of color. African American students not receiving adequate literacy and content instruction, while being disproportionately disciplined for nonspecific, subjective offenses such as defiance become a part of the pipeline. African American students often spend valuable instructional time in the office rather than in the classroom. Consequently, they fall further and further behind in reading achievement just as reading is becoming the primary tool they will need for taking on new content (p. 13). Education is the foundation of success. We cannot have equality if we do not address the issues with equity in our education system. All
children should have equal access to a quality education. When a large group of students do not succeed, then we have to take a hard look at why this is happening and take action to do better for our children (Ferguson, 2007).

Although stakeholders are aware of the challenge and continuously work to put systems in place to narrow the gap, the solution to the problem continues to remain elusive for many researchers and educators. It has become easy to identify the potential barriers of African American student achievement, but the focus must be on factors within a school district’s control. African American students must be part of a learning community that normalizes achievement and provides all students with the opportunity to participate in educational programs where everyone is an achiever. To begin to narrow the gap, district and school leaders must offer African American students sufficient opportunities in the classroom to develop the cognitive skills and habits of mind that would prepare them to take on more advanced academic tasks (Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

Many initiatives have been adopted to close the achievement gap. The National Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted by many states to ensure every student is college and career ready upon graduating from high school. School and district leaders understand that higher education can serve many purposes. It equips the next generation of students to make meaningful contributions to society and the workforce. Although there have been inroads made in increasing the number of African American students who obtain a college education, it is far from enough. Blacks today complete college at rates significantly lower than Whites and other racial groups. Educators, policymakers, advocates, and even students are concerned with how stubborn the racial gap in educational achievement has proven to be (Howard, 2010).
The school of study is XYZ elementary and it is in a large school district in the south. XYZ is one of 76 elementary schools in that district. There are over 35 instructional staff members, all representing the Caucasian race. There are 576 students in the school, with 21% of the student body being represented by the African American race. Caucasian students represent 54% of the student body; 18% is represented by Hispanics; 4% is represented by multiracial students; and 2% are Asian students. English Language Learners (ELL) represent 14% of the population. 66% of the population is on free and/or reduced lunch.

Third grade is the grade level of focus for this study. There are 97 students in third grade with 18 being of African American ethnicity. Five of the 18 students are in the third grade STARS class, which is a class for students who have been retained or are reading at a kindergarten and first grade reading level. XYZ Elementary received a school grade of a C for the 2018-2019 school year, which is down from a B of the previous year, Table 1 below shows the State Standards Assessment (SSA), ELA, and math, as well as the State Comprehensive Assessment Test (SCAT) science proficiency data, for the 2018-2019 school year. Math and science are represented because proficiency in reading is necessary for success in those areas.

Table 1

2018-2019 Proficiency Data Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT AREA</th>
<th>ALL</th>
<th>CAUCASIAN</th>
<th>AFRICAN AMERICAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MATH</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCIENCE</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the purpose of this study, the information below focuses only on the data for third grade students for the 2018-2019 school year. Third grade is a crucial grade for students, as it marks the grade for mandatory retention. Mandatory retention requires schools to hold back third graders who are not reading at a satisfactory level and who do not meet reading portfolio exemptions. Therefore, it is critical for students to show proficiency in the content area of ELA.

As mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 2), SSA is broken into satisfactory achievement levels. Students must score at least a level three to be considered satisfactory. Table 2 below shows how third graders performed at each level of satisfaction for the 2018-2019 school year.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADE</th>
<th>LEVEL 1</th>
<th>LEVEL 2</th>
<th>LEVEL 3</th>
<th>LEVEL 4</th>
<th>LEVEL 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The SSA was administered to 100 third grade students and 50% scored below satisfactory. Scoring a level one results in mandatory retention unless students have earned a good cause promotion. Students become eligible for a good cause promotion when they demonstrate an acceptable level of performance on an alternative standardized reading assessment or if they have received intensive remediation in reading and were previously retained in another grade. At the end of 2018-2019 school year, 67% of African American third grade students were identified as retained based on their standardized assessment score. This provides critical evidence of the achievement gap at XYZ elementary.
Purpose of the Program Evaluation

As it was my personal mission as a classroom teacher, the mission for many public schools involves *Bridging the Gap* and educating all students and preparing them for college, career, and life (Citation withheld to protect the anonymity of the school district under study). Closing gaps in achievement and ensuring all students are performing at high levels are critical to the social and economic well-being of African American students. Currently, African American students enrolled in public schools struggle to maintain academic proficiency, providing evidence that gaps in educational attainment continue to persist (Howard, 2015).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine if using Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) strategies with fidelity within the curriculum helps to close the racial achievement gap and improve proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA); specifically, for third grade students. Fidelity involves high quality implementation of a practice or program as intended by the researchers or developers (IRIS, 2020). For the purpose of this research study, fidelity refers to the commitment of stakeholders to adhere strictly to all policies and procedures that align to CRT. Another goal of this study was to gather information regarding specific practices and strategies used by classroom teachers to help students achieve academically. The curriculum and CRT strategies being evaluated may impact the reading and ELA proficiency of African American students in third grade. They were chosen for this evaluation project because being an educator and instructional leader in a large school district for over ten years, it was increasingly noticeable that African American students consistently display exceptionally low performance in the content area of reading. While reading remains a problem across all grade levels in elementary school, it is critical in third grade. Third grade students participate in the ELA State Standards Assessment (SSA) and must score at least a level two for promotion to the
fourth grade. Students can score up to a level five, with a level five being the highest and a level one being the lowest. Students scoring at least a level three are considered satisfactory. The goal of this evaluation was to see a decrease in the number of African American students retained in third grade by increasing their reading proficiency. Having young African American family members in elementary school and being a school leader, it has become a personal goal to help African American students rise above the odds stacked against them academically.

**Rationale for Selection**

The disparity in achievement is usually between Caucasian and African American students and the difference is seen in standardized test scores, grade point averages, graduation rates, and college admission data (Howard, 2015). Bridging the achievement gap is a reason that educational stakeholders should have a concern and a need for this study and serves as my rationale. The significance of studying the problem of low academic achievement of third grade African American students offers the opportunity to develop new strategies and resources within the classrooms to improve teaching and learning. Teaching impacts learning; therefore, it is critical that all students receive meaningful instruction. In many cases, when selecting curriculum and developing lessons, many educators are not accounting for how culture will impact a student’s ability to participate and learn. As educators, we recognize that we help maintain the achievement gap when we do not have a mindset for culturally responsive teaching (CRT). Having a CRT mindset is more than implementing a set of practices; it aims to celebrate the unique culture within all students (Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

Teaching cannot be a “one size fits all” model. Teachers must know how to adapt to the various cultural-based learning styles that students possess; specifically, African American students. Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of
including students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning (Brown University, 2018). In addition, it helps bridge different ways of knowing and engaging students from non-dominant cultures in demonstrating their proficiencies in language usage, grammar, mathematical knowledge, and other tools they use to navigate their everyday lives (Kozleski, 2019). Implementing the strategies behind cultural relevant teaching may lead to a better understanding of how to make learning more meaningful to African American students. It becomes personal to me because I have a grandson and several nephews that are a part of this achievement gap. Creating a solution to this problem means increasing the opportunity for my grandson and nephews to read above grade level and score above proficiency on reading assessments, which should translate into higher academic achievement across the board. This should be important to all stakeholders because it decreases retention rates of African American third grade students, increases the graduation rate of African American students, and prepares more African American students for college, career, and life.

The figures below show the ELA satisfactory of third grade students at XYZ Elementary between 2016 and 2018. The data are based on State Standards Assessment that are taken in April of every school year. Students are expected to score at least a level three to be considered satisfactory. Students that score a level one would be subject to mandatory retention. Figure 1 shows that in 2016, 60% of African American students scored below satisfactory in ELA, while only 36% of their non-African American peers scored below satisfactory. Figure 2 shows that in 2017, 50% of African American students scored below satisfactory in ELA, whereas only 38% of their non-African American peers scored below satisfactory. Figure 3 shows that 42% of African American students scored below satisfactory, whereas 39% of their Non-African
American peers scored below satisfactory. Each of the figures provide evidence of the existing achievement gap.

**Figure 1.** 2016 Grade 3 Cycle 3 ELA Below Satisfactory Ethnicity Comparison

**Figure 2.** 2017 Grade 3 Cycle 3 ELA Below Satisfactory Ethnicity Comparison

**Figure 3.** 2018 Grade 3 Cycle 3 ELA Below Satisfactory Ethnicity Comparison
Program Description and Goals

Educators have been struggling for decades to remedy the disparity in academic outcomes between African American and Caucasian students. This pedagogy was designed to help teachers harness the power of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) to do just that. The goal of the evaluation was to determine how to improve and increase the use of CRT strategies when providing English Language Arts (ELA) instruction to third grade students. CRT focuses on the academic and personal success of students as individuals by ensuring students are engaged in rigorous curriculum that they understand and can identify with (Escudero, 2019). I evaluated what was happening in the classrooms and monitor the meaningful connections students make with the content.

The goals of this study were to implement the use of CRT strategies, with fidelity, to improve the academic outcomes of African American third grade students. Through this implementation, the participating teachers would be creating a classroom culture that is conducive to student learning. If CRT strategies can produce improved reading and reading comprehension, then the result would be an increase in the number of third grade students passing the State Standard Assessments and an increase in the third-grade promotion percentages of African American students.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were used:

*Achievement Gap*: the difference between the test scores of African American and or low-income students and the test scores of their Caucasian and Asian peers (NEA, 2002-2015). Evidence for the achievement gap is most commonly found in dropout rates, test scores, college enrollment rates and other measurements of success in schools.
African American: African Americans are an ethnic group of Americans with total or partial ancestry from any of the Black racial groups of Africa. They make-up the single largest racial minority and the second largest racial group after Whites in the United States (US Legal, 1997-2016).

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT): a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning (Brown University, 2018). CRT is a mindset more than a set of practices and it aims to celebrate the unique culture within all students.

Fidelity: refers to high-quality implementation of a practice or program as intended by the researchers or developers (IRIS, 2020).

No Child Life Behind (NCLB): refers to the law that holds schools accountable for student outcomes, which was signed on January 8, 20002 by President George W. Bush. NCLB operates on the four principles of accountability for results; more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research (USDOE, n.d.).

Public Schools: schools maintained at public expense for the education of the children of a district. Public schools are meant to provide equal opportunities for all children (Tuthill, 2012).

Student Achievement: measures that amount of academic content a student learns in a determined amount of time. The most common indicator of achievement refers to a student’s performance in academic areas such as reading, languages arts, math and science as measured by achievement tests. (NBPTS, n.d.).
Research Questions

This study was intended to investigate if culturally responsive teaching strategies, when implemented with fidelity, would increase the ELA proficiency of African American third grade students. The following research question that I am investigating may help educational stakeholders address the issue of the achievement gap between African American students and their Caucasian peers. The overarching research question used in this study asks, How can implementing Cultural Relevant Teaching (CRT) strategies with fidelity in a third-grade classroom impact the English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency of African American students? The secondary questions that helped guide this study included the following:

a. How does the CRT process impact best practices in teaching?

b. How do teachers implement CRT strategies for student academic success?

c. Do teachers use CRT strategies in lesson planning?

d. How can implementing CRT strategies with fidelity in a third-grade classroom impact the English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency of African American students?

Conclusion

In Chapter 1, I introduced the context of my study. I provided the reader with a thorough description of my association to the topic as to share my openness to the formation of new understanding. I provided an overview of the key concepts surrounding the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and the academic achievement gap between African American third-grade students and their Caucasian peers. The research questions were presented as a core component of the project and provide a layer of inquiry, first exploring how the implementation of CRT strategies with fidelity impacts the ELA proficiency of African American students and then further probing how the perspectives of educational stakeholders might shape the overall experience of CRT. The potential benefits associated with investigating
this evolving phenomenon are of possible interest to district and school leaders, school staff, parents, and students. This chapter has provided the foundation from which future chapters further frame the CRT experience and the perspectives of educational stakeholders.
Section Two: Review of the Literature

The recent attention to the United States educational system has revealed that many students, especially African American students, are not receiving a quality education (Taylor, 2018). The disparities in African American and Caucasian student academic achievement have persisted over the last few decades, and as a result, have reinforced gaps in college attainment and graduation rates, employment, and wealth (Farley, 2017). For school districts to engage successfully in the question of equal access and opportunities for African American students, educational stakeholders must understand the history of African American families and the link to educational outcomes of African American students (Taylor, 2018). For the purpose of this literature review, race and class are central issues addressed as they relate to the education and achievement of African American students. I explored the use of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies in the teaching and learning of African American students by highlighting educational equity and African American academic achievement as possible outcomes. As an educator, I agree that the use of CRT strategies makes learning more relevant for African American students and allows them to build on their background knowledge (Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

In the literature review that follows, I first explored the educational impacts of African American students today investigating single parent homes, parental involvement, and culture. I also examined the following, listed by title headings: African American Student Achievement, The Achievement Gap, Education Reforms, Grade Level Retention, Mindsets, and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). This last section listed concludes with how the implementation of CRT can meet the challenges for improving educational outcomes of African American students.
Abstracts and full text articles from educational databases and scholarly articles were used to search for literature on educational achievement for minorities in general, school achievement of African Americans, cultural influences on school performance, and the relationship between CRT and African American student achievement. The years for the sources used range from the period 2005 through 2019. Journals such as *Journal of Negro Education, Marriage and Family, American Educational Research Journal*, among others were searched for relevant works. Additionally, books such as *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? Overcoming the Achievement Gap Trap*, and *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain* were also used in the process. The search period was conducted from July 22, 2018, to August 26, 2019, and more than 100 abstracts, full articles, books, and non-book sources were reviewed. However, only those relevant to the study were utilized in the literature review.

An achievement gap exists in a school system when one group of students consistently outperform another group. The achievement gap has come to be seen as normal by schools and communities at the top and bottom of the academic achievement scale, and it will take a new culture and a new way of thinking to eliminate the glaring inequality that is witnessed in public education (Muhammad, 2017). Common goals for school leaders have been to shape minds and help create institutions that embrace and achieve high levels of learning for all students (Atkinson, 2012). School leaders must believe that educational equality is possible, believing all persons can learn if they are provided with the appropriate conditions for learning. The chronic achievement gap in most public schools has created an epidemic of dependent learners unprepared to do higher order thinking, creative problem solving, and analytical reading and writing called for in the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As a result, educators have the responsibility of helping students learn how to learn. Although the achievement gap has
created the epidemic of dependent learners, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is one of the most powerful tools for helping students find their way out of the gap (Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

**Educational Impacts for African American Students**

There is an enduring crisis in the education system for African American students. Data continue to paint a grim picture by displaying the gaps between African American and Caucasian students across all content areas. African Americans still perform lower than any major racial or ethnic group in the United States, at all ages, in all subjects, regardless of class (McKinley, 2010). Opportunities for African American students to learn are severely limited. According to Tatum (2017), educational outcomes of minority students are much more a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, including skilled teachers and equality curriculum, than they are a function of race. Taylor (2018) wrote, “The school experience that diverse learners encounter determines their life chances in terms of their readiness for post-secondary education or employment opportunities” (p. 4). Research points out bias in schools, e.g., cultural insensitivity, disproportionately harsh discipline, lowered teacher expectations, tracking African American students into special education or remedial classes, have the cumulative effect of diminishing African American students’ enthusiasm and motivation for school (Tatum, 2017).

Failing to ensure educational success for African American students has long-term adverse impacts that are reflected in future employment prospects, poverty, and incarceration rates. Educators must understand the consequences of embedded inequities, how disparities are produced, and how they can be eliminated to ensure that all African American children can have the same opportunity for educational success as their Caucasian peers (Roberts, 2013).
Single family homes. Literature surrounding this topic notes that family influence appears to be one of the greatest contributors to student achievement. For years, society maintained that a typical family structure consisted of both parents and a child or children. From 2006-2016 a dramatic shift occurred from the typical two-parent family to a seemingly more contemporary family structure to include single-parent households (Edwards, 2013). The Coleman Report, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education asserted that the family plays a central role in whether or not diverse learners excel academically (Taylor, 2018).

The African American family has changed throughout years. Two-parent families were strong during and after slavery. However, the proportion of African American families headed by two parents began to decline sometime after 1925, and this decline became more pronounced in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Ferrell, 2009; Taylor, 2000). The US Education Census Bureau (2012) reported, 66% of African American children live in single-parent households compared to 24% of Caucasian children (Roberts, 2013). These figures portray a single-parent crisis in the African American community (Toldson, 2013). Single parenting can come with a multitude of hardships. These hardships are diverse and vary from one household to the next. African American children from single-parent households are associated with higher rates of delinquency, numerous challenges in the transition from childhood to adulthood, and greater barriers in education (Roberts, 2013).

Much of the literature pertaining to the children of single African American mothers has included dismal results and unfavorable endings (Massey, 2012). Children in single-mother families are five times more likely to live in poverty than their married couple counterparts. As a matter of fact, research revealed that if one is a single mother with multiple children of different ages, emphasis is placed on survival and day-to-day living, even though African American
parents want their children to succeed in school. Authors of the scholarly literature have identified the single parent within the African American household to be the mother; oftentimes portraying fathers in a negative light (Roberts, 2013). Taylor (2009) conducted research on children from mother-only families and stated the following:

“Children from mother-only families:

- have poor academic achievement.
- are more likely to have higher absentee rates at school.
- are more likely to drop out of school.
- are more likely to commit delinquent acts and to engage in drug and alcohol use.”

(p. 28)

In contrast, Massey (2012) concluded that growing trends uncovered fathers who were also assuming the primary role. Men are slowly closing the gender gap in lone-parent families. The involvement of fathers in their children’s schools seems to have a positive impact on their academic achievement. Taylor (2009) found, “Fathers’ involvement in their children’s school has a distinct and independent influence on children’s achievement over and above that of mother’s” (p. 30). When fathers get involved, their children are likely to do better academically. Many fathers seem to be relatively uninvolved in their children’s schools.

Many African American children live in toxic environments, no matter if those homes are headed by single mothers or single fathers. Given this, it is a testament to African American families that despite the challenges they face, so many find the resources to help their children avoid the more serious developmental and learning problems (Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018).

Parental involvement. One common theme in African American single-parent homes and the academic achievement of African American children is parental involvement. Parental
involvement as related to African American educational outcomes has emerged as one of the
most discussed topics in educational circles today (Jeynes, 2005). Parents and families have the
most direct and lasting effect on children’s learning and development. When parents are
involved, students achieve more and exhibit more positive attitudes and behavior (Choi, 2009).
Parental involvement is presented throughout the literature as important in children’s educational
outcomes (Darter-Lagos, 2011).

Authors of the scholarly literature suggested that parent involvement is an imperative
factor in student achievements. The evidence that parental involvement has a positive effect on
student academic achievement is compelling. Policymakers, school board administrators,
teachers, and parents all agree that parental involvement is critical for children’s academic
success (Jeynes, 2005). There are varying perceptions of African American parents and their
involvement in their child’s education. Literature pointed out many teachers believe African
American parents are lazy, poor, and not committed to education (Howard, 2015). Howard
(2015) suggested this type of negative thinking is based on America’s history and portrayal of
African Americans. In addition, research documented that teachers find it challenging to form
partnerships with African American parents. Concern has been expressed that many of the
parents are young and may not have been successful in school themselves. Teachers also tend to
be discouraged by the attendance rates of parents at school functions. For example, in most of the
intermediate classrooms at XYZ Elementary in 2018-2019, as few as five out of 19 African
American parents showed up for open house events. Literature also provided varying perceptions
of African American parents regarding the public-school system (Jeynes, 2005).

In contrast to much of the research, Howard (2015) pointed out African American
parents tend to hold high expectations of their children, but they believe deficit thinking among
teachers results in substandard curriculum and rigor for African American students. This leads to problems and misunderstandings between African American parents and teachers. The weakness of the literature relating to this theme is how parental involvement is actually defined. Some literature suggests that African American parents may show their involvement through activities such as extracurricular activities, celebrations, along with checking homework and correspondence in student journals (Howard, 2015). Elementary school leaders believe that teachers have the power to support student growth or hinder it regardless of parent involvement (Jeynes, 2005).

School districts attempt to bridge a gap between the varying perceptions of teachers and parents by encouraging teachers to build partnerships with families. Howard (2015) identified the following six components of a partnership model:

- Parenting: encouraging and supporting learning at home.
- Communication: exchanging of information between home and school.
- Volunteering: recruiting and training parents to assist in school.
- Learning at home: training parents and creating learning environments at home.
- Decision making: involving parents in PTA, committees, and councils.
- Community collaboration: coordinating resources and work to strengthen community ties.

Jeynes (2005) pointed out, given that parental involvement has been demonstrated to help the general population of students, some researchers believe that parental participation in education is one possible way of bridging the achievement gap (p. 260). Literature related to parental involvement points out that public schools should consider as a general rule that all individuals and families want what is best for their children.
**Culture.** There are differences in the way that students are provided access into academic content. The difference is a representation of culture relegated to isolated lesson plans versus a culture mandated daily through the ongoing curriculum (Pinder, 2008a).

Many researchers attribute achievement gaps to demographic and cultural disparities between teachers and students, and to teachers’ low expectations for poor and African American students (McKinley, 2010). Current research has shown that 80% of all public-school teachers are White, middle-class; and monolingual and the current make-up of the student population is 48% Caucasian. However, by 2024, projected figures put students of color at an expected 55% of the population. The cultural mismatch between teachers and students creates obstacles for effective instruction (Boyko, 2016).

Researchers theorize that culture shapes attitudes and ways of behaving, structuring one’s perception of the world, and is shared by most members of the same cultural group. The values, customs, beliefs, and communication patterns of a culture are often passed from one generation to another (Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005, p. 360). Unknown to many educators, these factors serve as a cohesive cultural force and can influence learning. According to Rovai, and colleagues (2005) differences in African American and Caucasian cultures suggest different approaches to pedagogy. Not attending to the use of culturally responsive pedagogies can create stress in African American students who enter predominantly Caucasian schools (p. 360).

Education must be relative to the student and the student must be able to interpret and transform the content presented in order to make the learning experience meaningful. African American students tend to see little congruence between their educational experiences in predominantly Caucasian schools and their own cultural upbringing and beliefs about education that center on cooperation, collaboration, and cultural relevancy (Rovai et al., 2005, p. 361).
Rovai and colleagues (2005) noted,

Much of the research examining the various factors thought to underlie the minority achievement gap concludes the sociological factors, such as teachers’ expectations, are often to blame. Also, Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) suggest African American students perform more poorly on tests when they believe they are being judged as members of a stereotyped group rather than as individuals. Researchers provide empirical evidence to suggest that this stereotype threat can be felt as physiological arousal that often results in substantial decreases in intellectual performance. (p. 361)

The relationship between African American students and African American teachers is saving academic careers. Low-income African American students who have had at least one African American teacher during their early academic career have higher chances of graduating from high school and attending college (Jones, 2017). In addition, Pinder (2008) and Wiggin (2007) noted:

The cultural mismatch between teachers and students is looked at as a factor that impedes successful student outcomes for some African American students. It is argued that African American students may feel alienated and under perform in schools because their own experiences have been ignored in the formal academic discourse in favor of the singular focus on the experiences and lived world views of the dominant group (p. 7). Even within African American schools where there is no cultural mismatch between teachers and students, teachers still convey hidden messages of African American social deviance in an attempt to sway African American students into embracing Caucasian values, which they deem as more appropriate values. (p. 8)
It is likely that providing an opportunity for African American students to spend one year in grades third through fifth with an African American teacher can result in higher test scores and move the dial on one of the most persistent gaps in educational attainment. “Schools do not just act on their students, but students act also on their schools through their individualistic, and collective cultural lifestyles brought into the school system (Pinder, 2008).

**African American student achievement.** Student achievement is the ultimate goal of education and it is typically measured in terms of outcomes on a set of performance expectations (Amerson, 2014). The mission of the school under study is to educate and prepare each student for college, career and life. African American students enrolled in public schools struggle academically, thus revealing the achievement gap (Howard, 2015). The gap that African American students experience is a pressing issue. Literature documents that the educational system of the United States has historically marginalized students of color and those from diverse backgrounds. According to the 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, Amerson (2014) pointed out the following:

- For 9-year old students in reading, Caucasian students outperformed African American students by 23 points.
- For 13-year old students in reading, Caucasian students outperformed African American students by 23 points.
- For 17-year old students in reading, Caucasian students outperformed African American students by 26 points.

There is a persistent 20+ point gap in the scores of Caucasian students over African American students, which warrants exploration of the underlying causes of the achievement gap (Amerson, 2014, p. 16). Many reforms have been unsuccessfully implemented in an effort to
provide solutions to the continuing achievement gap. Amerson (2014) stated that schools need to have two characteristics for African American students to be successful. First, African American students must be part of a learning community that normalizes achievement. This means African American students must be given the opportunity to participate in educational programs where everyone is an achiever. Second, schools must offer a broad range of supports that allow students to learn, to practice, and to receive reinforcement with regard to the behaviors and practices necessary to be an achiever.

Due to the failure of large numbers of African American children to reach an average level of competence, African American student achievement continues to be an urgent issue in American education. Research by Neckerman (2017) noted that the teachers and African American students regard each other as adversaries; and under those conditions, teachers are often reluctant to teach and the students resist learning. Most research on this theme revealed that little is known about schooling that positively affects African Americans.

**Achievement gap.** Many school districts have been battling with the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. Fifty years following desegregation, data continue to provide evidence that African American students are still lagging behind their Caucasian peers on standardized tests and graduation from high school (Atkinson, 2012). The real measurable difference among levels of academic performance between different ethnic groups of students is referred to as the achievement gap (USDOE, 2015). The achievement gap has shown up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates, among other success measures (Muhammad, 2017, p. 13). The achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students has generated a storm of controversy
ever since it became possible to measure quantitatively cognitive skills by race (Guskey, 2018, p. 76).

According to Guskey (2018),

The debate over the Black-White test score gap began with the publication of the Coleman report and its conclusion that family structure and poverty rather than school resources were the major contributors to the gap. More recent literature on the Black-White test score gap and school accountability refutes the conclusion of the Coleman report. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) argue that school interventions can work to close or eliminate the racial test score gap, but a lack of quality teachers and insufficient resources in high poverty urban schools plays a significant role in maintaining racial inequities. (p. 78)

Awareness about the achievement gap continued to be reflected through national reports. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014) compared national data on various ethnic groups in which they developed predictors that identified causes for the low performance of African American children. The indicators were grouped into the following four areas: early childhood education, early work experiences, family resource factors, and neighborhood context (Lacewell, 2012).

Historically, the achievement gap was an unobserved problem back in the 1800s during the Reconstruction Era when unequal education existed as result of racism and segregation between European American and African American students (Lacewell, 2012). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated the Coleman Report, which was a breakthrough report on education equity, found that in both math and reading, 87% of Caucasian students in grade 12 scored ahead of the average African American 12th grader (Atkinson, 2012).
The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) produced a report which showed that over a 20-year period, the academic growth of African American students has steadily increased (Muhammad, 2017, p. 14). A 2013 report revealed that the average score of African American students in fourth grade mathematics and reading compared to their Caucasian peers was 20 points lower, equivalent to more than four grade levels behind (Muhammad, 2017, p. 15). To date, African American students continue to fail reaching an average level of competence. Closing the achievement gap is an important issue because of its direct impact on the community and nation.

According to leaders of the district under study, schools must accept the fact that there are ineffective practices and policies in place that facilitators of learning cannot ignore. Hanushek’s (2016) analysis of the 2013 National Assessment for Educational Progress data in comparison to the historic Coleman Report notes, “That if narrowing the achievement gap continues at the current rate, it will be approximately 250 years before the achievement gap closes and over 150 years until the reading gap closes” (p. 1). Researchers have found that the persistence of the educational achievement gap imposes on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession (Bowen et al., 2018). Societal efforts to overcome the ill effects of discrimination for African Americans have not been effective enough; there continues to be inequities in almost every aspect of life, including education. Teachers must understand these factors to develop and implement the strategies needed to address the educational and developmental needs of African American students (Bowen et al., 2018).

**Education reforms.** In the education community, closing the achievement gaps is widely considered to be one of the major challenges facing the American public education system. It also tends to be one of the top priorities identified by educators, policymakers, elected officials,
and others working to improve the education system and individual schools (Carter, 2012, p. 177). Educational reform has been focused on changing the existing system with a focus on student achievement and has transformed schools in the United States to meet the needs of all learners.

*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was a major civil rights victory and was a historic and significant first step toward achieving educational equity for all students in the United States (Carter, 2012). The *Brown v. Board of Education* case brought to light the serious inequalities that existed in American schools, including quality resources, teachers, building structure, and transportation for African American and other students of colors (Taylor, 2018). The case banned racial segregation in schools 65 years ago. The *Brown* decision was propelled not merely by a principled objection to the idea of “separate but equal,” but by Southern states’ unrestrained contempt for the “equal” part of the formula. African American students were not only segregated but wholly denied meaningful educational opportunities (Taylor, 2018).

The achievement gap continued to be a nationally pervasive issue that former President George Bush was determined to address when he signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Bush identified the gap in academic achievement as “the greatest civil rights issue of our time” (Farley, 2017). NCLB (2001) was implemented to hold schools accountable for meeting the academic needs of all students on a national and local level (Lacewell, 2012). No Child Left Behind was aimed at both improving general, overall academic achievement, as well as closing the gaps in academic achievement between Caucasian students and underperforming minority students (Farley, 2017). The major components of NCLB addressed testing, adequate yearly progress (AYP), consequences, and teacher quality. The purpose of AYP was to expose
the academic disparity among groups of learners, compelling schools to address the issue of achievement gaps (Carter, 2012, p. 181).

NCLB required that by the 2005-6 school year, states administer tests in reading and math annually for grades 3 to 8 and at least once in grades 10 to 12. States were required to set annual targets for increasing achievement both overall and for subgroups and closing achievement gaps between groups (Farley, 2017). Although NCLB created accountability pressures to improve overall academic achievement and lessen disparities between African American and Caucasian achievement, there were no provisions included to support schools. In addition, NCLB failed in raising academic achievement, especially in urban school districts. By failing to create provisions, NCLB became an approach that was woefully inadequate (Lacewell, 2016).

Replacing the one-size-fits-all approach is the education reform, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which President Obama signed into law in 2015. “This bill upholds the core value that animated the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) signed by President Lyndon Johnson, the value that says education, the key to economic opportunity, is a civil right for all” (Milano, 2018). This new federal education law provides a powerful opportunity for educational stakeholders to ensure excellence and equity in public schools by opting out of the unfunded NCLB mandate and to determine their own measures of academic achievement and teacher accountability (Lacewell, 2012). ESSA calls for the teaching of higher-order thinking skills, and allows states to replace sanctions that narrowed the curriculum and caused good teachers to flee from low-performing schools with strategies for continuous improvement (Milano, 2018). Milano (2018) noted,
If federal and state officials approach ESSA through an equity lens, and if communities and stakeholders are informed and engaged, we could make serious progress toward the values of fairness and equity we espouse as a nation but have so much difficulty realizing. (p. 29)
ESSA has the potential to make the education of African American students a top priority for states, districts, and schools in the 21st century.

The historical context of education reform with regards to African American students continues to unfold in our nation as stakeholders persist in trying to bridge the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. African American students have made tremendous gains in academic achievement over the years; however, in spite of these reforms, the achievement gap has been highly resistant to educators’ best efforts to reduce it (Carter, 2012). Whether the gap ever closes or not, improved outcomes for African American students is at the heart of this challenge.

Grade Level Retention

Grade retention refers to the requirement for students to repeat the current grade level during the following year because of not meeting specified academic promotion criteria. Many states have adopted mandatory grade retention laws (Tavassolie & Winsler, 2019). The state of the district of research has dictated that students in the third grade repeat the grade if they have been unable to demonstrate emerging or defined proficiency on the state assessment. Tavassolie and Winsler (2019) stated,

Although the NCLB Act did not require third-grade retention for struggling readers, several states implemented such policies to meet accountability standards reflected by the NCLB Act. The state of research third-grade retention policy has been one of the oldest
and most frequently cited models of a strict third-grade retention policy. In 2002, this southern state tied the state assessment results to promotion-retention criteria. The state assessments yield student achievement results by achievement levels based on the student Developmental Scale Score (DSS). The policy has been implemented throughout all school districts in the state of research, despite multiple policy changes that have occurred periodically throughout the years.

New nationwide data revealed stark racial and ethnic disparities in student retentions. African American students are far more likely to repeat a grade than Caucasian students, especially in third grade (Tavassolie & Winsler, 2019). Without appropriate support and assistance, African American students experiencing grade retention are likely to continue upon developmental pathways characterized by low achievement, poor adjustment, and further academic failure.

**High-Stakes Testing**

The major goal of federal and state high-stakes testing policies is to improve schools. Although the practice of high-stakes testing date back to several decades in various districts and states, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 mandated high-stakes nationwide and at many more grade levels. NCLB made schools accountable for student performance through standardized testing (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). Policymakers have assumed that high stakes will motivate teachers and students to try harder and that the results will be used systematically to benefit all students. The state of the district under study testing the regime under NCLB has increased the number of students who are retained in third grade and who do not graduate (DOE, 2002-2019).
The State Standards Assessment (2015) is mandated for students in grades 3-10, and the scores are used for the high stakes purposes of student retention and graduation decisions. The State Standards Assessment (SSA) measures student achievement of the state standards, which specify the challenging content students are expected to learn in the areas of English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics (DOE, 2002-2019). Student performance on statewide assessments is categorized into five achievement levels (see Figure 4).

- **Mastery**—highly likely to excel in the next grade/course
- **Proficient**—likely to excel in the next grade/course
- **Satisfactory**—may need additional support for the next grade/course
- **Below Satisfactory**—likely to need substantial support for the next grade/course
- **Inadequate**—highly likely to need substantial support for the next grade.

*Figure 4. Achievement levels of SSA*
Students in grade 3 must achieve a level 2 or higher on the Grade 3 SSA ELA Reading assessment for promotion purposes. The following figures provide a breakdown by race/ethnicity of the students in one district who scored at a level 3 and above and at a level 1 on the 2018 ELA SSA for grades 3-5 students. Students scoring at a level 1 fall under mandatory retention (see Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5. Percentage of students at or above achievement level 3, by race or ethnicity.
Figure 6. Percentage of students at achievement level 1, by race or ethnicity

According to the data, a higher percentage of African American students score at a level 1 than at a level 3 or above (DOE, 2002-2019). According to Thompson and Allen (2012), “High stakes testing leads to standardized instruction that ignores individual differences, needs
and cultural variations, such as through ‘scripted curriculum’. One size fit few, and that one size takes as its norm white, middle to upper class experiences and cultural practices” (p. 218).

The Northwest Evaluation Association’s (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test is a computer adaptive online assessment that is administered three times a year in the content areas of reading and mathematics. After the student completes the assessment, he or she receives an overall score that represents the student’s mastery level of academic skills. MAP data can generate accurate and useful descriptive information about a student’s academic performance and progress. NWEA’s goal is to deliver reliable and accurate assessment data to school districts to assist in student proficiency improvement and to support instructional decisions (Macken, 2016).

MAP testing provides teachers information on which concepts a student has mastered and which concepts are an area of concern. Teachers can get reports by growth and proficiency. The test identifies the specific Rasch Unit (RIT) scale scores from MAP that correspond to the various proficiency levels for reading and math and for each student grade. The assessment also estimates the probability that a student with a specific RIT score would achieve a status of proficient or better on his/her state test (Medford, 2014).

**Mindsets**

Unconscious bias is particularly relevant today due to the current racial achievement gap. Racial bias in education can pose a problem in the average classroom. Even the most dedicated and well-meaning teacher holds stereotypes and beliefs that affect their students. Examining the unconscious racial bias, which influences one’s mindset, can be one way to close the nation’s persistent achievement gap between Caucasians and African American students.
**Our thoughts matter.** Educators must confront personal biases before they can address the issue of mindsets. Research has stated that the biggest issue related to closing the achievement gap is that educators often have the wrong mindset; and if we can change our mindset and enact cultural change, then schools can achieve equality for all students (Muhammad, 2017, p. 52). One distinct state of mind known as the circle of influence has been identified that can either promote substantive change or perpetuate stagnation. The circle of influence represents the parts of a person’s life or condition that are directly within his or her ability to control (Muhammad, 2017, p. 52). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), “If the achievement gap is going to be closed, students, families, teachers, schools, and communities lagging behind others in academic skill development have to work within their circle of influence first. Improvement begins with looking in the mirror.”

Mindset interventions can be used to improve educational achievement, especially that of African American students. If educators have a fixed mindset, it could be detrimental to African American students. When people hold a fixed mindset, they tend to quickly form judgments of others.

The studies of personalities and attitudes toward learning have shaped educators’ beliefs for decades. Mindsets, according to psychologists, are people’s basic beliefs about the nature of human attributes, such as intelligence or personality (Dweck, 2012). Some people believe that these attributes are fixed traits, in that a person has a fixed amount of intelligence or a certain personality, and that cannot be changed. Those with a fixed mindset, or entity theory, believe these ideas. However, others with a growth mindset, or an incremental theory, believe that all people can become substantially more intelligent, and that anyone can develop their personality over time (Dweck, 2012).
The educator has a central role in establishing a supportive classroom environment, and the educator’s attitude (shown by tone of voice, comments), enthusiasm, and interest in the curriculum affect learners directly and indirectly (St. Amant, 2017).

**Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT)**

In a time when “student performance and achievement are often seen as the only indicators of school success” (Carter, 2012, p. 177), school leaders are charged with closing the achievement gap between African American students and their Caucasian peers. The sizeable achievement gap that exists between these two subgroups of students is a common trend among schools across the country (Carter, 2012, p. 177). Amongst a long lasting educational reform movement, many changes to bridge the gap of educational opportunities for African American students have surfaced. However, not of them has demonstrated significant progress in closing the achievement gap (Carter, 2012, p. 178).

According to Bowman and colleagues (2018), “The American education system must enact a paradigm shift to integrate effective, culturally responsive instructional practices to support and maintain equitable educational attainment for all students.” Research has stated that African American children are born with the ability to learn but require experiences to bring their potential to fruition (p.34). Bowman and colleagues (2018) also stated, “Capabilities develop through interactions with people and things that shape the brain circuitry controlling children’s physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. It is also developed through culture specific tasks” (p. 36). For this reason, it is imperative for teachers to recognize cultural differences and set high expectations for all children. This is done through culturally responsive teaching (CRT), which is a tool for helping African American students find their way out of the gap (Guskey, 2018).
Hammond and Jackson (2015) defined culturally responsive teaching as,

An educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing, all the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning. (p. 15)

CRT practices endeavor to address the cultural mismatch between teachers and their students by establishing learning environments that foster respect and tolerance, where the diversity of culture, language, race, and exceptional learners are valued (Boyko, 2016). Many educational researchers feel that culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is key to supporting the learning of minority students and, therefore, to closing the achievement gap (Hanover Research, 2016). However, the questions of how and why culture can be used to close the achievement gap remains vague for many educational stakeholders. Teachers need adequate background knowledge and usable information to know how to apply culturally responsive tools and strategies (Hammond & Jackson, 2015, p. 21). Culturally responsive teaching has been promoted not as a critique of inequitable social structures, but as a new source of lesson plans or classroom activities. CRT requires teachers to undertake both an ideological and instructional shift in order to achieve true implementation (Hanover Research, 2016).

Educational researchers made a case for improving the school success of ethnically diverse students through culturally responsive teaching (McKinley, 2010).

McKinley (2010) noted,
When academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. As a result, the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters. (p. 5)

Culturally responsive teaching means that the teacher connects with students, rather than simply teaching content. The focus of the learning falls as to where the students are, each child starting with important background knowledge and experiences to build upon (Hanover Research, 2016). CRT bridges what students know into new learning, which makes the content relevant and authentic for the learner (McKinley, 2010).

According to Boyko (2016), CRT is not a program or a few well-placed strategies. It is not a set of materials. It is not just about the academic content. It is a process that involves knowing and teaching the whole child. Doing so requires that educators achieve the following:

- Foster a growth mindset within themselves and their students.
- Recognize and understand their own cultural beliefs and biases.
- Realize the critical need to develop relational capacity with their students.
- Create a learning environment that is safe, supportive, and respective.
- Maintain high expectations for all students.
- Embrace the importance of equity in meeting the needs of students.
- Provide support through scaffolding and differentiation.
- Bridge connections between home, school, and community.
- Consistently evaluate their teaching practices and adopt a willingness to change in order to address the ways in which their students learn.
• Embrace learning and growth for themselves and their students (p. XXII).

Conclusion

The question, “How does culturally responsive teaching impact the teaching and learning of African American students?” was explored. First, the educational impacts of African American students were outlined. In order to better understand some of the underlying causes of disparities in African American achievement, the impact of single-parent homes, parental involvement, and culture were investigated. This section also articulated the effects of African American Student Achievement, The Achievement Gap, Education Reforms, Grade Level Retention, Mindsets, and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Lastly, while delving into culturally responsive teaching, this chapter highlighted the importance of creating a learning community that accepts and values all races, cultures, and genders, there must be a cultural approach to content.
Section Three: Methodology

Research Design Overview

An extensive review of the literature has shown that there is an abundance of information on the academic achievement gap and culturally responsive teaching (CRT). However, there are relatively few studies that have explored the impact that CRT strategies can have on the English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency of African American third grade students or the impact CRT can have on the achievement gap. The purpose of this chapter is to provide more information about the methodology used to explore the research questions in this study. This chapter includes information about the key participants, types of data, data analysis, limitations, and ethical considerations that were needed to conduct the research.

The original research questions, types of data collection, and data analysis were changed due to the impact of COVID-19. As a result of COVID-19, schools closed and teachers and students finished the 2019-2020 school year through virtual teaching and learning. I was not able to complete observations to observe the implementation and fidelity use of CRT strategies. The research was based on teacher perceptions of CRT and only surveys and interviews were used for data collection.

The disparity in test scores between African American and Caucasian students, known as the achievement gap remains one of the most pressing and perplexing problems in U.S education today (Rovai et al., 2005). The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of an elementary school staff’s perspectives on cultural relevant teaching (CRT) strategies and how they are implemented in their leaning environments to impact the attainment and achievement gap of African American third grade students. This study entailed a process that would require educators to step out of their comfort zone and change their ways of thinking about students,
specifically African American, and how to best teach them. Hammond and Jackson (2015) stated,

   Cultural responsiveness begins when a teacher recognizes the cultural capital and tools students of color bring to the classroom. Cultural responsiveness allows teachers to mirror the various ways students learn in their instruction, using similar strategies to scaffold learning. (p. xxI)

If the achievement gap is going to be narrowed and the ELA proficiency of African American third grades students increased, then potential strategies from culturally responsive teaching and the perspectives of general education teachers on CRT should be explored to understand how implementation can improve academic achievement. The best strategy for incorporating all of the factors of CRT was to use a phenomenological qualitative study. A phenomenological study was selected to examine the impact CRT had on the ELA achievement of African American students. Phenomenology is the study of the “lived experiences” of individuals. Phenomenological research is the attempt to identify shared experiences among various individuals experiencing shared phenomena (Ballad & Bawalan, 2012). Using a phenomenological study permitted me to increase the understanding of the benefits of CRT from the perspectives of general education teachers and staff who were living the experience.

   Conducting a qualitative research study allowed me, as the researcher, to gain an understanding of the underlying reasons for the identified problem and helped to provide more insight on establishing a solution. In addition, qualitative research allowed me to study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (McLeod, 2008).
The foundation of qualitative methodological research is derived from social sciences. The goal of utilizing a qualitative research methodology is to understand, deduce, analyze and illustrate the phenomenon of interest through contextual descriptors and by seeking to capture the true essence of an experience (Lahman et al., 2010). Patton (2002) stated,

Qualitative research analyzes data from direct fieldwork observations, in-depth, open-ended interviews, and written documents. Qualitative researchers engage in naturalistic inquiry, studying real-world settings inductively to generate rich narrative descriptions and construct case studies. Inductive analysis across cases yields patterns and themes, the fruit of qualitative research. (p. 38)

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that investigators utilize a qualitative methodology when seeking to present a detailed view of a specific topic from the perspective of the participants being studied. The procedure for conducting a qualitative study encompasses investigators composing research questions that explore participants’ experiences that evoke meaning about the topic at hand. The investigator then collects data by interviewing participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

Before making contact with prospective participants, I sought permission from the school principal to conduct research at her school. I provided the school principal with an informed consent form requesting permission to conduct research. Participation occurred on a volunteer basis. I invited third grade general education teachers at XYZ Elementary School in a large southern state district to participate in the study. Invitation was done through an informed consent to participate in a survey and interview. XYZ is one of 76 elementary schools in that district. There are over 35 instructional staff members, all representing the Caucasian race. There
are 576 students in the school and 66% of the population is on free and/or reduced lunch. The demographics of XYZ Elementary is as follows: 54% Caucasian; 21% African American; 18% Hispanic; 4% Multiracial; and 2% Asian. English Language Learners (ELL) represent 14% of the population. The 2018-2019 school grade was a C, dropping from the previous year’s grade of a B.

In addition to third grade general education teachers, select members of the School Based Leadership Team (SBLT) were invited to participate. The members selected from the SBLT were those that worked directly with students on a regular basis and interacted with all types of school and student data. Teachers and SBLT staff are familiar with CRT due to district-wide professional development. The survey for teachers and staff allowed them to share a little of their insight regarding CRT.

The invitation to participate in the study was the survey informed consent and was in the form of a Word document. The informed consent was mailed to the participants’ homes. The invitation included title of the study, who was conducting the study, the purpose of the study, and the requirements for participating. The invitation also included a paragraph highlighting that participation was voluntary and all responses were confidential.

Prospective participants provided their consent by completing the survey and returning directly to my home address. A stamped-return envelope was provided to each of the participants. The survey was included with the informed consent and contained questions about Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and the participants’ perspectives on how CRT impacted student learning. The surveys were kept in a secured location at my home until they were ready to be analyzed. The research began after approval from the Internal Review Board was given.
Data Gathering Techniques

An assortment of approaches could be used in phenomenological-based research including open-ended interviews, observations, and surveys. Significant data collection was used in this study to gain an understanding of the impact of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) from the perspectives of educational stakeholders. Data for this study were collected using the instruments identified in the following sections.

Surveys. Participants completed a survey that was designed using a four-point rating Likert scale. Participants were asked to strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree to each statement. The surveys provided insight as to the stakeholders’ perceptions on CRT.

Interviews. Phenomenological interviewing is a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in a philosophical tradition. The purpose of this type of interviewing is to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before conducting interviews, I made it a goal to establish a risk-free environment and to develop a level of trust with each participant. I conducted a one-on-one interview with each participant, which lasted approximately 30 minutes via Zoom. There were eight open-ended questions asked. Participants were asked how they felt consistently throughout the interview to ensure comfort. They were advised in the beginning that they could opt out of participating at any point during the interview.

The one-on-one interviews allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences with CRT. Open-ended and semi-structured questions were used to gather information on patterns, themes, overall perceptions, and information needing more clarification or details. Each participant was asked the exact same question, using the same wording; the only differences were the follow up questions used to clarify interviewees responses. The interview was recorded
via Zoom. To ensure integrity of the data, hardcopies of the transcriptions were securely stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher’s home. Data will be kept secured for one year before being destroyed.

Patton (2002) suggested the following as to the benefits of a standardized interview approach:

- The exact instrument used is available for inspection by those who will use the results of the study.
- The interviewer is highly focused so that the interviewee’s time is used efficiently.
- Making the responses easy to find/compare facilitates the analysis.

For consistency and reliability purposes, member checking was used, which allowed the study participants the opportunity to respond and review data analysis. During this process, each research participant was given the opportunity to review, respond, and modify her interview data, as well as an opportunity to correct any errors or incorrect interpretation of the interview. Each participant was given a member check form, as well as a transcription of the interview to use for corrections and/or comments on the analysis of their interview data. Participants were given one week to review their interview transcription for validity. I informed the participants that after one week, without any feedback or concerns, it will be assumed that the transcription was accurate.

**Data Analysis Techniques**

Grbich (2013) suggested there are four standards examining qualitative research: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. To judge the soundness of this research, credibility and transferability were used. Credibility involves ensuring the outcome and results of the study are credible and believable from the perspectives of the participants in the research study. Transferability provides the opportunity for other researchers to generalize the
findings of one study to similar situations. The key to successful transferability lies in my providing enough information for comparison by other researchers.

Triangulation of this data study included the comparison of participants’ responses to the survey questions and interviews. Patton (2002) stated that triangulation is used to determine the consistency of using various data sources. The data sources were used to determine how the participants in the study formed their perspectives regarding culturally relevant teaching strategies. Data were collected, evaluated, and analyzed. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), coding is a procedure that themes are categorized from the data collected. Common themes were developed from significant statements and responses made during the interviews and documented in the surveys. Temi software was used for the analysis of the interviews. When the interviews were completed, I identified common patterns within the data. Audio of the interviews were transcribed in a Microsoft Word document. Research participants were given the opportunity to correct any errors or incorrect interpretations of the interview.

Organizing the data as described above allowed me to sort and categorize the interview data into themes. The cutting and sorting method involved placing the questions and narrative responses from each interview into a labeled theme descriptor envelope until all statements were categorized based on key terms, phrases, and concepts. As themes emerged utilizing this method, additional envelopes were created and labeled to collect and sort the data.

The surveys were sorted, graphed, and color-coded using Microsoft Excel. I separated all responses of the participants to the questions into subgroups. To ensure confidentiality, I did not use names. Participants were referred to as Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, and so on.

An independent reader was used in the review of notes and reflections to ensure no intentional or unintentional bias existed. This is important to avoid immoral and unethical
conduct during research. The independent reader had no affiliation with the research, the research participants, or the location where the research took place. Analyzing and interpreting the data involved drawing conclusions and representing it in a manner to provide a summarization and explanation (in words) to provide answers to the research questions. The full analysis process for this study was completed using Creswell’s six-step model.

Step 1: Organize and prepare the data for analysis.

Step 2: Read through all the data.

Step 3: Begin detail analysis using a coding process.

Step 4: Develop a description of the participants.

Step 5: Decide how the description will be represented in the study narrative.

Step 6: Interpret or make meaning of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Ethical Considerations**

When dealing with educational stakeholders, there can be a great deal of ethical issues. Ethics can generally be defined as a system of moral principles that affect how people make decisions and lead their lives. The concepts of ethics have derived from religions, philosophies, and cultures (BBC, 2014). Ethics are applied to many facets of life, one being that of research. The primary goal of my research was to promote the pursuit of knowledge and truth. The ethical standards aligned to research helped me to ensure my goal was achieved. Research ethics in my phenomenological study included the planning, conducting, and reporting of research. There are three objectives in research ethics: (a) the protection of human participants and animal subjects; (b) ensure research is conducted in a way that serves interests of individuals, groups and/or society as a whole; and (c) examine specific research activities and projects, looking at issues
such as management risk, protection of confidentiality, and the process of informed consent (RREE, 1999-2016). I addressed any ethical concerns by including some of the following ethical principles: honesty, objectivity, integrity, confidentiality, responsible publication, social responsibility, competence, and legality. My research goal was to adhere to the ethical standards and principles for the public to support and believe in the research.

To ensure that the data collection for this study was obtained in an ethical manner, I followed the guidelines of National Louis’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). All persons who participated in the study volunteered to be a part of the study. Confidentiality is a key factor, and all participants were assured of the confidentiality of their statements. Pseudonyms were used to enhance anonymity. All participants were provided a description of the research procedure, its purpose, risks, and anticipated benefits. All participants were also offered the opportunity to ask questions or to withdraw from the research at any time.

Limitations

The limitations of this study could be many. One would be getting an African American staff member to participate and provide her perspective of CRT. In addition, the perspectives of CRT strategies were varied amongst the teaching staff, making consistency difficult. Due to COVID-19, observations could not take place. However, the presence of an observer would have impacted the study being conducted by questioning its reliability, simply because behavior may change due to an observer being in the classroom. With the presence of an observer, teachers may have implemented strategies that were normally not incorporated in day-to-day lessons. In addition, with the presence of an observer, some students may have changed the way they normally responded to lessons and the teacher. Lastly, the study may be limited by the self-motivation and confidence of the participants.
Conclusion

This chapter shared the research methods that were designed to help gain an understanding of an elementary school staff’s perspectives on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies. The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine if using Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) strategies impacted the attainment and achievement gap of African American third grade students.
Section Four: Results

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of an elementary school staff’s perspectives on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies and how they are implemented in their leaning environments to impact the attainment and achievement gap of African American third grade students. Hammond and Jackson (2015), defined culturally responsive teaching as an educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing, all the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning. (p. 15)

The perceptions of the participants were gathered through surveys and interviews. I am the equity champion at XYZ Elementary and often engage staff in conversations related to culturally responsive teaching. The equity champions in each school are trained and empowered to serve as thought partners among their colleagues in guiding equity conversations around student achievement and discipline disparities. Participating in these conversations helped me with the initial recruitment of participants for the study. Subsequently, I contacted potential participants who readily engaged in CRT conversations and activities. I became interested in CRT after participating in the first cohort of Equity and Excellence offered in my school district. Equity in Excellence promotes collaboration with stakeholders in implementing equitable strategies that are focused on meeting the needs of diverse learners. It was a start to finding a viable solution that could help educators with some of the negative outcomes African American students are faced with English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency.
The original purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact CRT had on the ELA proficiency of African American third grade students. The study was to involve collecting and analyzing ELA data, observations and field notes. However, the study had to be adjusted as a result of the national pandemic, COVID-19. Weeks after the study was approved by the district of study, schools were closed due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The study had to be modified to include only the perceptions of staff as they relate to CRT and its impact on achievement.

In this chapter, I reported the findings from six participant surveys and Zoom interviews. In reporting the findings, I described the CRT perspectives of the six school staff members. This chapter also includes a description of the six participants, a description of the setting in which interviews took place, and themes that emerged from the study as it related to the research questions. Also presented in this chapter are the data collected through the surveys and interviews. I organized the data from the survey by each question according to the responses. I arranged the Zoom interview data in a succinct way so as to answer the research questions and present participants’ responses.

**Participant Profiles**

I recruited teachers and other staff from XYZ Elementary to participate in this research. Due to the small size of the sample being investigated, I used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allowed me to select participants that shared similar characteristics, having close interactions with African American third-grade students. In addition, I wanted to have participants who were in the school district and who had some knowledge of the CRT pedagogy. All of the participants were females and of the Caucasian race. Five of the six participants were veteran teachers. Veteran teachers are teachers who have at least five years of teaching
experience. Of the six participants, four were general education teachers and two were members of the school-based leadership team. I included the non-teaching staff since perceptions from a wide range of staff allowed me to gather more data from varied perspectives. All of the participants had consistent interactions with African American third grade students.

I omitted some details purposely in the reporting of the findings to protect the identity of the participants. I identified participants as A, B, C, D, E, and F. Participant A was 49 years of age and an educator for two years. She completed her first year as a third grade teacher as she looped with her second grade class from the previous year. Participant B was 47 years of age and an educator for 18 years. She was the Skills Training and Related Services (STARS) program teacher at XYZ Elementary for two years. As a STARS teacher, she provided intensive instruction to previously retained third grade students and to students who were reading two to three levels below grade level. Participant C was 52 years of age and a school counselor for 20 years. She served on the SBLT and oversaw the intervention data for all students at XYZ Elementary. Participant D was 42 years of age and an educator for 20 years. Participant D transitioned from the classroom to the school’s media tech position. She also served on the SBLT and provided interventions to struggling students. Participant E was 40 years of age and for six years, she served as the third-grade team leader for several years. Participant F was 45 years of age and an educator for 21 years.

**Data Collection: Teacher Survey Questions and Responses**

I provided participants with a survey to complete. I mailed the survey and other consent forms to the participants’ homes. A pre-stamped and addressed envelope was included with the consent form for the return of all documents. All participants acknowledged and confirmed they understood the consent form documents of the study and provided their signature consenting to
participate in the study. After the teachers read and signed the consent forms, they were asked to complete the survey. The signed consent forms and surveys were mailed back to the researcher’s home address.

The teacher survey was designed using a four-point rating scale. Participants were asked to strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree to each Likert scale. I designed the survey to collect the participants’ insight on CRT and how it was implemented in their classroom. The following survey questions, illustrated with graphs, were asked of each participant. Once I received the surveys, I assigned each participant a letter (A-F) and then labeled and graphed the responses.

The first statement on the survey inquired, “I recognize and value the cultures represented in the classroom/school.” Of the six participants, four strongly agreed and two agreed that they recognized and had value for their classroom cultures (See Figure 7).

![Figure 7. Survey Statement 1](image)

Survey statement 2 inquired, “I am knowledgeable about the various cultures represented in my classroom/school.” Of the six participants, five agreed and one strongly agreed that they were knowledgeable about the cultures being represented within their classrooms (Figure 8).
Survey statement 3 inquired, “I take time to learn about the cultures represented by the students in my classroom/school.” Three participants agreed, two disagreed, and one strongly agreed that they take the time to learn about their students’ cultures (see Figure 9).

Survey statement 4 inquired, “I recognize and consider my own cultural influences and how they affect the way I communicate, my expectations, and how I teach and/or interact with others.” Half of the participants strongly agreed and half agreed that they were able to recognize and consider their own cultural influences and the impact they have on their communication, expectations, interactions, and teaching (see Figure 10).
Survey statement 5 inquired, “My classroom or environment is decorated in ways that represent multiple cultures.” Of the six participants, one strongly agreed, three agreed, and two disagreed that their environments were designed in a way to represent the multiple cultures of their students (see Figure 11).

Survey statement 6 stated, “Books, handouts, and other instructional materials I use to teach reflect multiple cultures.” Five participants agreed and one strongly agreed that they use various instructional materials to reflect multiple cultures (see Figure 12).
Survey statement 7 stated, “I currently use culturally responsive teaching strategies to help my students learn and be successful.” Of the six participants, three agreed, two strongly agreed and one disagreed that they help their students learn and be successful through the use of CRT strategies (see Figure 13).

Survey statement 8 stated, “I have built a strong and positive relationship with the parents of my students.” Four participants strongly agreed and two agreed that they have built strong and positive relationships with their parents (see Figure 14).
Summary of Teacher Survey Questions & Responses

The survey results indicated that the research participants were aware of cultural responsiveness and had culturally responsive practices in place within their learning environments. Most of the participants had some type of professional development relating to CRT. As this research study was being conducted, the district was beginning to make CRT professional development mandatory. The research further indicated that staff were using cultural relevant teaching strategies to teach and engage their students. Table 3 displays a summary of participants responses to each survey statement.
Table 3

Participants Survey Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey / Questions</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I recognize and value the cultures represented in the classroom/school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B, F</td>
<td>A, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am knowledgeable about the various cultures represented in my classroom/school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A, B, C, D, F</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I take time to learn about the cultures represented by the students in my classroom/school.</td>
<td></td>
<td>A, B</td>
<td>C, D, E</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I recognize and consider my own cultural influences and how they affect the way I communicate, my expectations, and how I teach and/or interact with others.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B, C, F</td>
<td>A, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My classroom or environment is decorated in ways that represent multiple cultures</td>
<td></td>
<td>B, C</td>
<td>A, D, F</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Books, handouts, and other instructional materials I use to teach reflect multiple cultures.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A, B, C, D, F</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I currently use culturally relevant teaching strategies to help my students learn and be successful</td>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B, C, D</td>
<td>A, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I have built a strong and positive relationship with the parents of my students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D, F</td>
<td>A, B, C, E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The letters refer to Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, Participant E, and Participant F.

Teacher Interviews

Interviewing is one of the primary ways to obtain data in a qualitative study. Each of the participants signed a consent to participate in a one-on-one interview. Initially, the interviews
were to take place in person. However, with the closing of schools as a result of COVID-19, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Zoom is a cloud-based video communications app that allowed me to setup audio conferencing. For privacy purposes, the cameras were not used during the interview. I coordinated interview dates and times that were convenient with the participants via phone or their personal emails. Once a day and time was established, I sent a meeting invitation to the participants. Thirty minutes before the scheduled interview time, an email with the zoom link was sent to the participants.

In this semi-structured interview, I used open-ended questions that were carefully worded and arranged for consistency. I asked each participant the same questions using the same wording. I did allow for some flexibility by asking clarifying questions if a participants’ response wasn’t clear. I designed the interview questions (Appendix B) to gain insight into staff perceptions of CRT and how they were implementing it in their environment. Participants gave consent to have the interviews recorded.

I used Temi, which is an advanced speech recognition software to transcribe the recorded interviews. I used Temi because of its accuracy with transcribing interviews and it helped me to establish themes. Each participant was given the opportunity to review, respond, and modify their recorded interview data, as well as an opportunity to correct any errors or incorrect interpretation of the interview. The participants were emailed a copy of their transcripts to verify the accuracy and validity of the transcription using a member checking form. During member checking, no participant reported any misperceptions or inaccurate accounts of what was said during the interview.
Themes

Researchers must make sense and meaning of their data in an effort to categorize the finding into themes (Banks, 2018). I began the data analysis process as I reviewed the survey responses, listened to the recorded interviews, transcribed the data and re-read the interview data to gain a full awareness of what was included. I read through the data seeking noticeable and similar responses from the participants regarding their perceptions of CRT. At the conclusion of data analysis process, I reviewed the research questions and then identified themes. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1. How does the CRT process impact best practices in teaching?

RQ2. How do teachers implement CRT strategies for student academic success?

RQ3. To what extent do teachers use CRT strategies in lesson planning?

Analysis of Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, “How does the CRT process impact best practices in teaching?”

Findings

I found that all participants expressed a positive perception about CRT strategies for African American students that struggle with proficiency in English Language Arts. Most of the participants shared the belief that best practices in teaching was positively impacted by the CRT process because it allowed them to make relevant connections with the students and build strong relationships with the students and their parents. Participant A stated, “It allows us all to learn about each other and I can make sure that I am attentive to their cultures.”
The majority of the participants believed that understanding their students background and culture was the first step in the CRT process and having knowledge of the students’ background and culture created best practices in teaching because they knew how to meet the individual needs of their students.

Two major themes emerged from the data analysis about the impact of the CRT process on best practice in teaching: roles of the teacher and exposure to conversations about race.

**Themes: Research Question 1**

**Theme 1: Role of the Teacher.** It is critical for educators to practice decoding students’ cultural background and understanding the role it plays in establishing best practices in teaching. Ddamulira (2019) said that effective teachers aren’t just concerned about student data that lives in tests, grades, and attendance. Effective teachers recognize the importance of students’ cultural identities and how it shows up in their learning. Interview question two obtained the participants’ perception of CRT. A common thought amongst the research participants of the study indicated that CRT meant understanding their students’ cultural background to best meet their academic needs. Participant A stated, “It means to me, knowing my students’ cultural background to make sure that I am bringing to light their culture in the classroom.”

Participant B stated, “I think it's making connections with the kids, making sure that I'm being respectful of all races, and valuing their differences.”

Participant E stated, “It means knowing my students and like really knowing my students, their interests, their cultures, and their home lives,

All six participants strongly agreed or agreed that they recognize and value the cultures represented in their classroom/school. They have identified that recognizing and having knowledge of their students’ cultural identities helps them to build connections.
Participate D stated, “I think it's connections. You know, I want to connect with every kiddo that comes through those library doors and trying to understand what their life is like outside of school.”

Participate F stated, “Well, it's important for me to understand their language, their culture, their values, their family dynamics, and their home environment.

Participant responses showed the importance of teachers knowing their students and building personal relationships with them to meet their academic needs and help them to make connections with the learning taking place in their classroom communities.

**Theme 2: Exposure to Conversations About Race.** Three of the six participants *strongly agreed* and the remaining three *agreed* that they recognized their own cultural influences and how they affect their communication, expectations, and interactions with their students. All participants felt they had the opportunity to engage in conversations centered on race in an educational setting.

Participant A stated, “I took the, CRT training that the county offered and we were told that the class was a safe place to discuss our true feelings about race and what it meant to us, how it affected us.”

Participant F stated, “I have taken part in conversations that centered on culturally relevant teaching and I always felt enlightened when I learned about my students and their cultures.”

Although most of the participants highlighted their conversations focused on race that were conducted in professional development or in a school setting, one of the six participants discussed having conversations about race with students. Participant E stated,

I’ve definitely had conversations centered on race with my students usually when
we're working in about the January timeframe with module D, which is when they
learn about Ruby Bridges and Martin Luther King, Jr. and they definitely have a lot
of questions.

Data related to this theme revealed that most of the participants engaged in professional
development that exposed them to conversations about race. These opportunities gave them
greater insight into the various cultures of their students.

**Analysis of Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked, “How do teachers implement CRT strategies for student
academic success?”

**Findings**

According to Rucker (2019), by third grade, many culturally diverse students are one or
more years behind in reading and one of the most impactful tools for empowering students to
find their way out of the achievement gap is through CRT. Culturally responsive teaching is
integral to the essence of effective teaching.

I found that five of the six participants used culturally responsive teaching strategies to
help their students learn and be successful. All participants *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that they
use books, handouts, and other instructional materials to reflect multiple cultures and build
connections. Two themes that emerged from the data analysis about implementing CRT
strategies to promote student academic success are collaboration and equitable classroom
environments.

**Theme 3: Increase collaboration.** Collaborative learning methods are a key component
of CRT; they enable students to share and learn from their collective experiences and challenges
(Boyko, 2016). Most of the participants indicated that collaboration is a positive result of the
implementation of CRT strategies when increasing student academic success. All participants acknowledged using multiple CRT strategies to increase participation and collaboration. CRT not only produces a collaborative climate for students, but it also builds upon collaborative partnerships between the home, school, and community of the student. Four of the six participants strongly agreed and two agreed that the implementation of CRT has allowed them to build strong and positive relationships with the parents of students.

Participant B stated, “Some of them are note taking strategies, graphic organizers; we do a lot of interactive learning, trying to get them to collaborate to build their oral language skills.”

Participant E stated, “Students are placed in collaborative groups, usually by ability, but sometimes it changes depending on what we're learning.”

Most of the participants communicated that CRT increased opportunities for students to collaborate, which created more effective learning environments.

**Theme 4: Equitable classroom environments.** Teachers must be intentional about eliminating biases and creating a culturally responsive classroom climate. Biases often exist that influence how educators talk and relate to their students. Farley (2017) stated, “Teachers create an environment in which all children have equitable opportunities to learn when they continually check for understanding, respect differences, and use language that builds trust and positive relationships.” All participants strongly agreed or agreed that they recognize and consider their own biases and how they affect the way they communicate, teach, and set expectations for their students. In addition, all participants indicated that they use some type of method to create equity in their classrooms and school environments.
Participant A stated, “To be fair to all of my students, I consider each and every one of them as an individual and, allow them certain things that give them the benefit that everyone else has so to speak. “

Participant F stated, “I create equity in the classroom by, number one, focusing on inclusion and openness.”

Participants expressed the importance of creating equitable learning environments for all students to ensure they all had the opportunity to have academic success.

Analysis of Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked,. To what extent do teachers use CRT strategies in lesson planning?

Findings

Culturally responsive teaching involves more than adding culture to the classroom walls and class library. CRT is also about connecting students to the content being facilitated by using intentional instructional strategies and lesson planning (Hanover Research, 2016). Intentionally implementing CRT strategies in lesson plans requires educators to reflect on their own cultural lens and draw on their students’ culture to shape the planning and presentation of curriculum and instruction (Boyko, 2016). Intentionally planning for the implementation of CRT strategies helps to build cultural competence. It also gives students an opportunity to learn from inclusive curriculum, equitable learning, and engaging students with their needs in mind. When teachers find value in various cultures represented in their class or school, they find purpose in intentionally planning for CRT. Two themes that emerged from the data analysis about using CRT strategies when lesson planning engages courageous conversations about race and
professional development. When stakeholders are provided with professional development aligned to CRT, it often generates courageous conversations based on race.

**Theme 5: Courageous Conversations.** Courageous conversations about race has guided cultural transformations in schools and educators towards becoming more racially aware and culturally responsive, specifically in the area of classroom instruction (McKinley, 2010). Most of the participants of the study indicated that they engaged in conversations centered on race in an educational setting.

Participant A stated, “Well, I've actually had two opportunities, and I'll share one. Um, last year I took the, CRT training that the County offered.”

Participant B stated, “Yes, I attended the 12-hour CRT training last summer. “

Participant C stated, “I've taken part in conversations centered on race both when I took a training on culturally relevant teaching and we've had a couple of discussions like that at staff meetings at our school. “

Participant F stated, “Yes, I have taken part in conversations that centered on culturally relevant teaching and its impact on student achievement in college, in my ESOL classes and even in my Spanish classes.”

Most participants revealed that courageous conversations did not happen often; that participating in courageous conversations created a level of much needed discomfort.

**Theme 6: Professional Development.** Professional development for culturally relevant teaching has the potential to address achievement gaps across ethnic groups and for students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Guskey, 2018). District and school leaders can develop an environment where self-reflection is supported, and a safe space where difficult conversations about race and culture can be discussed. This type of professional development can prepare
teachers to practice culturally relevant teaching. Five of the six participants of the research study mentioned participating in a district or school-based training to develop their ability to implement CRT strategies.

Participate A stated, “So yeah, the CRT training was profound. The one that that I spoke of previously. But I also remember our restorative practice leader doing his CRT training.”

Participant B stated, “I did the CRT training; that was the 12-hour one. I've done an Equity training. I've done Restorative Practices and using effective circles.”

Participant C stated, “I know we've done a lot within our own staff meetings and last summer I did do the two-day culturally relevant training.”

Participant E stated, “I did attend the AVID CRT training which gives multiple strategies on how to group students, icebreakers learning groups, um, things like Socratic seminars and circles.”

Participant F stated, “I have taken the 12-hour culturally relevant teaching back in 2018 and I am signed up for the 3-hour culturally relevant classroom training in June.”

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the findings of the research study. The findings of the study were based on the survey and Zoom interviews with four third-grade general education teachers and two members of the school-based leadership team. The findings were arranged in two sections that organized the research participants’ responses to the survey and interview questions. The first section of the data analysis was comprised of the survey taken by the research participants of the study. The second section of the data analysis was comprised of Zoom interview questions with research participants of the study. I gained the participants’ perspectives on the on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies and how they were
implemented in their leaning environments to impact the attainment and achievement gap of African American third-grade students.

The data revealed that the participants perceived and executed different roles in the implementation of CRT to impact the achievement of African American third grade students. Participants admitted to engaging in courageous conversations and professional development that helped them recognize and value the various cultures represented in their class and school. Based on the participants’ perspectives and their responses given on the survey and Zoom interviews, six themes were established and discussed as to their perspectives on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies and how they were implemented in their leaning environments to impact the attainment and achievement gap of African American third grade students.
Section Five: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter begins with the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided the study, followed by a summary which reviews the implications of the findings and how they relate to the literature and conceptual framework. The final part of this chapter contains recommendations to policymakers and stakeholders for policy or practice of future research.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine teachers’ perceptions toward culturally responsive teaching strategies and its impact on the attainment and achievement gap of African American third grade students. Further, this study attempted to gather information regarding specific practices and strategies used by classroom teachers to help students achieve academically. Hammond and Jackson, 2015 define culturally responsive teaching as,

An educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing, all the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning. (p.15)

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices endeavor to address the cultural mismatch between teachers and their students by establishing learning environments that foster respect and tolerance, where the diversity of culture, language, race, and exceptional learners are valued (Boyko, 2016).

Qualitative data was collected for this study, which was structured around the following research questions:
RQ 1. How does the CRT process impact best practices in teaching?

RQ 2. How do teachers implement CRT strategies for student academic success?

RQ 3. To what extent do teachers use CRT strategies in lesson planning?

This qualitative research study produced several results that align with the concepts of the literature review. The results were categorized into the following themes:

• Role of the teacher
• Exposure to conversations about race
• Increase collaborations
• Equitable classroom environments
• Courageous conversations
• Professional development.

The conceptual framework used to examine these results was based on the social constructivist theory, research findings, and literature.

Summary of Findings

Research Question One

Research Question 1 asked, “How does the CRT process impact best practices in teaching?”

All six participants perceived culturally relevant teaching (CRT) to be essential to implementing best practices when providing instruction to all students. However, based on the responses given, most of the participants perceived CRT to be an approach that allows them to step out of their comfort zone and change their ways of thinking about African American students and how to best provide meaningful instruction to them. On the other hand, one
participant perceived CRT as picking the right strategy to simply implement within their instruction. It was compared to picking a strategy from a list to use with a specific racial group. These perceptions about CRT and best practices resulted in themes that emerged such as role of the teacher and exposure to conversations about race.

Exposure to conversations about race. There is no recipe for culturally responsive teaching; it is a disposition. Knowledge and awareness of this process are needed in order for educators to learn more about their own potential journeys toward culturally responsive teaching (Hammond, 2015). Most educators have the best interest of students at heart and want them to be successful academically. However, many educators do not know enough about how race and culture impact everyone’s lives and lacking that understanding leads to a series of missteps that result in a lack of trust and ability to work together or the success of African American students (Singleton, 2015). Having conversations about race is the first step in overcoming this barrier.

Conversations about race has an impact on best practices in teaching because it helps educators to challenge their own assumptions and question the inherent biases that exist in schools and classrooms. As educators engage in tough conversations about race, they see inequity at work, become more cognizant of the perspectives of others, and help to develop “informed empathy” rather than sympathy toward African American students and their families (Singleton, 2015). Furthermore, exposure to conversations about race requires educators to think about their craft differently, which help to narrow the teaching and learning gap of African American students.

Despite the challenges school leaders have with addressing the issue of racism while educating African American students, the interview transcripts revealed that all of the
participants had the opportunity to participate in conversations centered on race in an educational setting. They believed the experiences were uncomfortable, but transformational.

Participant A stated,

There were multiple conversations that were quite uncomfortable because they were on sensitive issues. We were told that the class was a safe place to discuss our true feelings about race and what it meant to us, how it affected us. It was a very emotional experience for me. It was extremely uncomfortable because people quietly were told to go write words that come to your mind about those different races. I got very emotional about it because you don't realize what people think and what their perceptions are because they're thinking it and don't necessarily say it, but their actions say it. So, that was the biggest, eye opening thing for me in a professional setting, regarding race because a lot of the words were something that I would have never thought of, but other people do.

**Research Question Two**

Research Question 2 asked, “How do teachers implement CRT strategies for student academic success?”

Over a period of time, African American students have experienced an accumulation of educational debt which has contributed largely to the achievement gap. This creates a need for educators to have a deeper understanding of the culture of African American students’ in order for them to achieve academic success (Muhammad, 2017). Addressing cultural differences in the teaching and learning process is critical in avoiding cultural stereotyping. Culture plays a critical role in a students’ identity and contribute to their behavior and beliefs.
To engage students effectively in the learning process, educators must know their students and their academic abilities individually, rather than relying on racial or ethnic stereotypes or prior experiences with other students of similar backgrounds (McKinley, 2010). Survey results revealed that most participants used culturally responsive teaching strategies to help their students learn and be successful. The themes of collaboration and equitable classroom environments emerged from the surveys and interviews.

Increased collaboration. Collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of learners working together. Collaborative learning has been shown to not only develop higher-level thinking skills in students but boost their confidence and self-esteem as well. Research shows collaboration benefits all students, specifically African American students as it provides educational experiences that are active, social, contextual, engaging, and student-owned, which will lead to deeper learning (Farley, 2017).

Student discussions that take place during collaboration support the theories of social constructivism. Vgotsky believed that the higher mental processes develop when information is shared during activities. The social constructivist theorist believed that learning works best in a social environment (Banks, 2018). Educators can find power in collaborative work. When their ways of seeing students, planning for them, facilitating opportunities, and reflecting on their experiences are informed by what they learn from them, all kids benefit (Minor, 2019). Providing students with the opportunity to collaborate support the belief that everyone is capable of making contributions to the learning process and shows that each student has a gift (McKinley, 2010).

Cook and Friend (2010) stated collaboration is an essential strategy for schools for schools today because of the varied needs of the students in the classroom. Students bring their
cultures and varied experiences with them into the classrooms; each one is unique and important. To tap into their uniqueness, teachers need to have collaboration skills to optimize services for each student. When it comes to narrowing the academic achievement gap, collaboration becomes a necessity, not a luxury.

In this study, most participants agreed to implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies to help their students learn and be successful. They perceived strategies that allowed for collaboration to be quite effective for students; particularly African American students. Participants indicated during interviews to seeing social, psychological, and academic benefits for students as a result of collaboration. According to Farley (2017), “Collaboration allows students to connect learning to their own interests and the wider community outside of school.”

**Equitable classroom environments.** Minor (2019) defined educational equity as a measure of achievement, fairness, and opportunity in education. It is achieved when all students receive the resources they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school. The literature revealed that educational outcomes of minority students are much more a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, including skilled teachers and equality curriculum, than they are a function of race (Tatum, 2017). Furthermore, Roberts (2013) states, Failing to ensure educational success for African American students has long-term adverse impacts which are reflected in future employment prospects, poverty, and incarceration rates. Educators must understand the consequences of embedded inequities, how disparities are produced, and how they can be eliminated to ensure that all African American children can have the same opportunity for educational success as their Caucasian peers.
Education can be a system that values compliance over creativity. Inequity exist any time stakeholders adopt a classroom stance that does not honor multiple ways of being knowing, and communication. It also exists when work is done in ways that are blind to the contexts of family, community, culture, power, and oppression (Minor & Alexander, 2019).

Literature revealed that educators do not account for how culture will impact a student’s ability to participate and learn when they are selecting curriculum and developing their lessons (Lacewell, 2012). However, survey results showed that participants took the time to learn about the cultures represented by their students to help create equitable environments. In addition, interview results revealed that all of the participants indicated taking the time to create equity in their classrooms and learning environments.

Participant A stated, “To be fair to all of my students, I consider each and every one of them as an individual and, allow them certain things that give them the benefit that everyone else has so to speak.”

Participant B stated, “I can't say I treat them all equal because they're not equal. Every kid has strengths; every kid has weaknesses. So, I give them what they need to be successful in the classroom.”

Participant F stated, “I create equity in the classroom by, number one, focusing on inclusion and openness. I valued their answers, their thinking and their opinions.”

Interview and survey results indicated that educators are finding various ways to attend to the equity issues in their classrooms. They are seeing how culturally responsive teaching predicated on providing equitable opportunities to learn is able to support students access to learning outcomes. Minor (2019) stated, educators cannot guarantee the outcome that all students
will start businesses, lead their families, and contribute to their communities, but they can guarantee access.

**Research Question Three:**

Research Question Three asked, “To what extent do teachers use CRT strategies in lesson planning?”

Researchers have found that careful instructional planning that considers students’ individual needs is essential for helping to close the achievement gap between African American students and their Caucasian peers (McKinley, 2010). To meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds educators must take the time to plan relevant, effective instruction, which begins by reflecting on classroom practices and viewing them through the lens of cultural relevant pedagogy (Boyko, 2016). Lesson planning using the practices of CRT allows educators to focus on recognizing, understanding, and utilizing the cultural differences that students bring to the classroom (Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

Survey results revealed that all participants take the time to understand and recognize the various student cultures when planning to teach and communicate with students. During interviews, participants discussed using what they learn about their students’ culture and backgrounds when planning to meet the needs of each student. Boyko (2016) says effective CRT lesson planning is accomplished when teachers have knowledge about the background and culture of their students and use it to provide meaningful instruction. Research states that a core consideration in the development of CRT lessons is for educators to learn about each child and family and intentionally adapt lessons to respond to each students’ strengths and needs (Boyko, 2016).
The social constructivist theorist believes constructivism is a mindset that helps educators create lesson plans based on student learning to create problem solvers and construct knowledge from their experiences (Banks, 2018). The themes of courageous conversations and professional development emerged from the survey and interview results.

**Courageous conversations.** According to Muhammed (2017) concepts like equality, fairness, and justice have been claimed to be the cornerstones of our core value system. However, we simultaneously live in a society that is not equal and not fair and just to all. Inequality in achievement still exists along racial and economic lines and if the achievement gap is going to be closed, everyone involved in the process must experience growing pains (Muhammed, 2017). Those growing pains begin with courageous conversations.

Muhammed (2017) states that to fully understand racial disparities in a nation, one first has to understand that racism is woven or embedded throughout the fabric of society and all of its educational institutions. Courageous conversations on race and racism are an important aspect of addressing inequities in education and in society. Engaging in such conversations will help to address the inequities related to systematic racism (Tatum, 2017).

Teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the impact of racism on students and learning is a critical aspect of creating equitable, inclusive, and appropriate classroom and learning environments (Emdin, 2017). Therefore, it is important that school and district leaders facilitate and deepen the discussion of race and social justice in education among their instructional staff. During the interviews, all of the participants indicated engaging in courageous conversations and transitioning out of their comfort zones.

Research suggests that participation in courageous conversations will help educators to embrace culturally responsive teaching, which is an important aspect of addressing inequities
and closing the achievement gap (Emdin, 2017). Muhammed (2017) stated that as educators use courageous conversations to employ culturally responsive teaching, they will be able to (a) provide equitable education opportunities for all students; (b) build upon the background and experiences of culturally diverse students; (c) empower students to think critically; (d) leave no child “academically behind”; and (e) teach equality, justice, and power.

**Professional development.** To facilitate confidence and competence in the implementation of culturally relevant teaching, educators need systematic and intensive training that includes research-based practices (Banks, 2018). Professional development is the vehicle by which school and district leaders increase the skills of its staff and renews the organization. Research has found that ongoing professional development is critical in supporting and maintaining effective educators (Singleton, 2015).

Current educational policies and laws outline the need for evidence-based, high quality professional development for teachers and school staff (Banks, 2018). School leaders can build the cultural knowledge base of teachers and school staff through professional development. Results of the participant interviews revealed that they all participated in training and staff development related to CRT. Training was offered through the district-wide trainings, pre-school trainings, professional learning communities, and book studies.

Participant A stated,

The CRT training was profound. I took away two major things that I use every single day in my classroom and one is circles. In my classroom we do a circle in the morning, every day of the week. It's just a connection. It gets everybody’s talking out, everybody's, you know, wiggles out. And it also allows for the students to connect to one another, on all levels. And we do circles also when there's a class, an entire class
issue that I think needs to be dealt with. And it works well because it brings out points of view from all different students and helped all different students consider the other person's point of view. The other thing that I love is when there is a disagreement between two students or an issue occurs and I need to talk with them, I use the talking points provided to talk to them separately, ask them how they would feel if this happened to you, what do you think you should do now? Kind of putting the ball in their court instead of me just reprimanding but giving them the ball to pass back and forth and then to make amends.

Professional development is at the heart of educational reform. Therefore, if teachers are expected to improve culturally responsive teaching strategies, they must be given the required knowledge and skills. As school and district staff continue to engage in professional development aligned to CRT, it will lead to the reality that educators need to look within themselves, at their own cultural backgrounds and beliefs, at their current teaching practices, and at their relationships with students, in order to become a culturally relevant educator (Boyko, 2016).

**Conclusions**

This study has confirmed and added to what the literature states about culturally relevant teaching and its impact on the academic achievement of African American students; specifically, third grade for this study. Research stated, that culturally responsive teaching is a process that involves knowing and teaching the whole child (Boyko, 2016). According to the data analyzed, the research participants all indicated they were knowledgeable about the various cultures represented in their classrooms or environments. Participants also indicated that they take the time to learn about their students and the cultures they represent. According to the social
constructivist theoretical framework, culture gives the child much of the content of their thinking, that is their knowledge. The social interactions that are part of being culturally responsive are essential to social constructivism (Taylor, 2018). Based on the findings of the research, the theoretical framework provided a clear and concise description of findings.

**Recommendations for Leadership**

Research indicated that in the public education system, certain groups of students are able to excel more than their peers. It has been theorized that systematic racism still exists within the schooling system and is keeping certain groups, specifically African Americans, from succeeding or achieving their full potential in the education system (Emdin, 2017). There are differences in the way that students are provided access into academic content. As the majority, or Caucasian, culture sees themselves represented on a day-to-day basis; other minority cultures, for example: African American students, may only see themselves every once in a while. As the African American population in America continues to increase, understanding how persons of color construct perceive, enact certain roles, and engage in cultural wealth will become more relevant in scholarly work and research.

When considering the significant gap that exists, educators and school leaders must begin to acknowledge, address, and value the cultural differences that African American students possess. An equitable education may be the key to narrowing the achievement gap. Although equity is a journey and not a destination, there must be changes in order to create a more equitable experience for African American students, specifically those in third grade facing the retention policy. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a pedagogy that supports equity in education. CRT means that the students’ culture helps to form the culture of learning. A culture
where students bring their culture to the forefront and the work makes learning authentic (Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

The school administrator plays a critical role ensuring that teachers have sufficient time and resources to make innovative changes to teaching practices in their classroom that include culturally responsive teaching. This means supporting CRT strategies that include cooperation, communication, and connectedness as central features to success. The building administrator should engage school staff in courageous conversations and also provide professional development opportunities about CRT to bring specificity about teaching strategies and accommodations to advance the initiative. Leadership must focus on the relational competencies that encompass knowing, valuing, doing, caring; and sharing power, resources, and responsibilities (McKinley, 2010).

**Recommendations for Educators**

The way that a student is treated by a teacher matters. All students deserve the chance to succeed and that can happen when educators enact purposeful strategies. Emdin (2017) stressed, “The more teachers know about the discourse styles of ethnically diverse students, the better they will be able to improve academic achievement” (p. 125). An important aspect of culturally responsive teaching is that educators see learners as academically capable coupled with valuable experiences. For effective implementation of CRT to support the education and grade level promotion of African American students, educators must enable a multicultural approach in order to foster a sense of acceptance and understanding for the many different views and perspectives that exist within the lives of African American students.

African American students represent a portion of the schooling population that are regularly forgotten or dismissed. However, they are the students in great need of a very specific
setting (Farley, 2017). Culturally responsive teaching practices draw upon students’ prior knowledge to move them forward. Therefore, educators must be willing to scaffold, focus on instruction, and challenge African American students beyond what they already know. While building upon the students’ prior knowledge, educators must also incorporate the use of content and materials that serve as both windows and mirrors into the lives of learners (Emdin, 2017). In order to work more equitable, educators must work towards making a difference in the academic achievement of African American students through the breakdown of stereotypes and the empowerment of all learners (Farley, 2017). Every child comes in with endless potential and it is the job of the educator to ensure the student experiences feeling empowered, valued, and affirmed (Banks, 2018).

It is critical for district and school staff to understand the value of relationships and setting high expectations for all students. Participant A highlighted the positive impact of building relationships and establishing high expectations both academically and behaviorally. She noted the that African American students felt better about themselves and displayed increased confidence.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies is not a new method but rather an effective strategy that improves the equity of education for African American students, specifically those dealing with the retention policy. The work done through CRT has implications for students and educators. The implementation process involves both parties actively. This study provided research that informed the educational community with insights into how CRT practices are beneficial for African American students. Additionally, this research
examined how educators culturally perceived how responsiveness impacted their teaching practices.

An area for future research would be to interview elementary school administrators and district leaders on their perceptions about culturally responsive teaching and the type of professional development they perceive is needed to support the school community. A final area for future research would be to conduct a study on the perceptions of African American students and their parents on how CRT impacts academic achievement.

**Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations of this research. The study focused on collecting staff perceptions about culturally responsiveness and how it impacts their interactions with African American students. First, the study’s sample size was limited to six participants. A larger number of participants would amplify a similar study and provide opportunities to increase the amount of information that is collected concerning teacher perceptions of CRT and how it impacts African American third grade students.

The second limitation to the study was the lack of diversity in the participants. While there was a diverse range of teaching experiences, all participants were Caucasian females. There was extraordinarily little diversity amongst the instructional staff at the school of study. Therefore, the lived experiences and perceptions of minority teachers were not expressed in this study.

Anonymity is one form of confidentiality and qualitative research cannot be carried out without breaching anonymity. Another limitation to the study was interviews were recorded, potentially limiting the freedom of expression or hesitation of the participants to candidly
respond about the school, their students, and or families. Perhaps, participants would have answered more candidly had they been provided a written questionnaire to fill out anonymously.

Fourth, the researcher had a short span of time to collect data. Due to timing of this study and the closure of brick and mortar schools due to COVID 19, data had to be collected in a short period of time. Future studies not impacted by pandemics will allow multiple interviews and observations to be conducted. By doing so, participants will have multiple opportunities to delve deeper into their experiences and perspectives of culturally responsive teaching.

The final limitation of the study was the absence of school and district leaders’ perspectives concerning the topic of culturally responsive teaching. Future expansion of this study may aspire to include school and district leaders, which could increase the probability of individuals in leadership positions participating. Including this population could provide the researcher with opportunities to gain information from other perspectives regarding culturally responsive teaching, its goals, and its intentions, as it relates to the academic achievement of African American students.

Reflective Conclusion

This study provided an opportunity to learn about the perceptions and practices of six elementary school staff members who currently teach and interact with African American third grade students and understand the impact of the retention policy. Collectively, participants expressed a genuine love for their students and the teaching profession. Each of the participants expressed their processes for learning and understanding the various cultures of their students. They shared their experiences with courageous conversations related to race and the cultural responsiveness knowledge they have acquired through professional development to support their teaching, interactions, and expectations of African American students. Each participant believed
that her teaching skills were sufficient to identify them as culturally responsive. Participants did not hesitate to explain their strategic attempts to promote their students’ academic success, emphasizing the use of various strategies to aid in connecting their lessons to the perceived cultural backgrounds of their students.

Generally, educators have little to no influence on what population of students they will be assigned to teach and interact with. However, it is almost certain that at some point they will teach and interact with African American students. Therefore, it is essential that educators are equipped with the necessary skills required to meet the needs of African American students, who come from diverse populations and backgrounds. Emdin (2017) makes note that culturally responsive teachers have the ability to apply aspects of their students’ cultural backgrounds into their teaching. Becoming a culturally responsive teacher involves precise strategies applied to teaching as a result of the cultural backgrounds of students being taught. The findings of this study revealed that in the school and district’s quest to increase the academic achievement of African American students, they must formally educate all staff on the multi-dimensions of culturally responsive teaching. By doing so, educators will acquire the pedagogical skills required to meet the academic needs of their African American student population and to help prepare them to become members of a culturally diverse society (McKinley, 2010).
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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questions for Teachers and Staff

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Teachers/Staff

Appendix C: Member Checking Form

Appendix D: Interview Questions and Participant Responses
Appendix A

Survey Questions for Teachers and Staff

On a scale of 1-4, with 1 being strongly disagree and 4 being strongly agree, please provide feedback regarding how you felt about the summer library program for questions 1-8.

1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree

1. I recognize and value the cultures represented in the classroom/school.

   1
   2
   3
   4

2. I am knowledgeable about the various cultures represented in my classroom/school.

   1
   2
   3
   4

3. I take time to learn about the cultures represented by the students in my classroom/school.

   1
   2
   3
   4
4. I recognize and consider my own cultural influences and how they affect the way I communicate, my expectations, and how I teach and/or interact with students.

5. My classroom or environment is decorated in ways that represent multiple cultures.

6. Books, handouts, and other instructional materials I use to teach reflect multiple cultures.

7. I currently use culturally relevant teaching strategies to help my students learn and be successful.
8. I have built a strong and positive relationship with the parents of my students.
Appendix B

Interview Questions for Teachers/Staff

1. Have you ever taken part in a conversation centered on race in an educational setting? If yes, describe that conversation and how did it make you feel?

2. What does “Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)” mean to you?

3. What experiences have you had that have helped you understand the impact of race, culture and ethnicity on teaching and learning?

4. How do you create equity in the classroom or your environment?

5. What’s important to you in understanding the cultural background of your students?

6. Specifically, what do you do to learn about your students’ cultural background?

7. Describe the instructional strategies you use in your classroom to help all students learn.

8. Describe the training and staff development, related to Culturally Responsive Teaching, you have participated in.
Appendix C

Member Checking Form

Dear _____________________,

Thank you for volunteering your time to provide me with such a thorough interview. Attached please find a copy of your transcript of the interview. Please review the transcription for accuracy and validity of responses. If I do not hear from you within one week, I will assume that you agree with the content of the transcription. Please feel free to contact me at either (727) 479-8210 or via email at mrsgproctor70@yahoo.com should you have any questions or additional comments for me to include.

Thank you again for your time and enthusiasm to participate in this study.

LaShawn Proctor
Appendix D

Interview Questions and Participant Responses

The following are the interview questions asked of each participant and their responses to each question.

Interview Question 1

Interview Question 1 asked, Have you ever taken part in a conversation centered on race in an educational setting? If yes, describe that conversation and how did it make you feel?

Participant A stated,

Well, I've actually had two opportunities, and I'll share one. Um, last year I took the, CRT training that the County offered. I believe it was a three-day training. There were multiple conversations that were quite uncomfortable because they were on sensitive issues. We were told that the class was a safe place to discuss our true feelings about race and what it meant to us, how it affected us. One of the activities we did was go around the room and write on large poster paper stuck around the room on the walls with labels of different groups of people; African American, Native American, Mexican, etc. We were placed in small groups based on a colored card. Most of the people in our group we did not know. We were asked to write what comes to mind when we think of each group of people. It was a difficult experience to witness the lengthy list of preconceived thoughts we each had for different groups of people. Many thoughts were extremely negative. It was a very emotional experience for me. It was extremely uncomfortable because people quietly were told to go write words that come to your mind about those different races. I got very
emotional about it because you don't realize what people think and what their perceptions are because they're thinking it and don't necessarily say it, but their actions say it. So, that was the biggest, eye opening thing for me in a professional setting, regarding race because a lot of the words were something that I would have never thought of, but other people do. Does that make sense?

Participant B stated,

Yes, I attended the 12-hour CRT training last summer. I think it was in the summer. Anyways, I didn't mind having the conversations to a certain point, but there were times that I definitely felt uncomfortable because of people's biases. I don't necessarily believe that we should treat one race differently just because of scores and statistics and backgrounds. I just think that we should treat them all equal, not necessarily based on the color of their skin.

Participant C stated,

I've taken part in conversations centered on race both when I took a training on culturally relevant teaching and we've had a couple of discussions like that at staff meetings at our school. I have to be honest and say sometimes it did make me feel a little uncomfortable. I guess as different people shared their perspectives, I often looked around the room to see if those perspectives were making anyone feel uncomfortable or if they were being accepted as “okay, we're having an open discussion here, so it's nothing that anybody's being judged on. We're just openly sharing our feelings so that we can all have an understanding and maybe hope to change some perspectives. . . . I guess that's where the uncomfortableness comes in.”
Participant D stated,

I think a conversation like with colleagues, coworkers, I don't feel like I have that has centered around race. However, I did start the book study we had here last year and I feel like I definitely felt uncomfortable. It wasn't something that I was, um, overly excited about.

Participant E stated,

Okay, so in the classroom I've definitely had conversations centered on race with my students usually when we're working in about the January timeframe with module D, which is when they learn about Ruby Bridges and Martin Luther King Jr., and they definitely have a lot of questions. They have a lot of good conversation. It makes me feel encouraged because our students are able to have respectful conversations and I like to see that learning is taking place so that hopefully history stops repeating itself.

Participant F stated,

Yes, I have taken part in conversations that centered on culturally relevant teaching and its impact on student achievement in college, in my ESOL classes and even in my Spanish classes. So, I had some really great teachers who shared their backgrounds and one in particular, who is like my mentor, was from Argentina and it was so interesting to learn all about her culture. Also, I took part in conversations as a student teacher with USF in Cambridge, England. Just learning about the British culture was very eye opening for me and learning how to teach those students. I always felt enlightened when I learned about my students and their cultures.
Interview Question 2

Interview Question 2 asked, “What does Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) mean to you?”

Participant A stated,

It means to me knowing my students’ cultural background to make sure that I am bringing to light their culture in the classroom, whether it be through a lesson, having them relate something from their life from at home to the lesson that we're doing or if we do a big circle and, um, we talk about it. Sometimes kids bring things up that they do as a tradition in their homes. It allows us all to learn about each other and I can make sure that I am attentive to their cultures. One thing we just did in the virtual learning is we did a world project; it was an ancestry project and it was absolutely amazing how the kids presented them online these last two weeks that we've had video. And, the projects that they did were incredible. They were so proud. And you can see that it just helps them feel more a part of the whole group when they can share a part of themselves and their ancestry. So that's what it means to me.

Participant B stated,

To me, I think it's making connections with the kids, making sure that I'm being respectful of all races, and valuing their differences, like building classroom and community rapport “family style.” Making sure that they all know that we're family in the classroom. It doesn't matter what color you are, what religion you are, or anything like that.

Participant C stated,

I think that means taking a look at the group of students you're working with, in my
job as a counselor or as a classroom teacher, looking at your classroom and looking at all the backgrounds of every student in your classroom. What background do they come to your class with or what gifts do they come to your classroom with and what disadvantages might they come to your classroom with. Making sure that your lessons cover all different kinds of learning modalities so that you are reaching every student in that group or in that classroom; also making sure that your lessons are a representation of the different cultures in your classroom.

Participant D stated,

So, to me, culturally relevant teaching means not only being aware of all of the different cultures within the classroom but appreciating that all people behave and react differently to specific situations.

Participant E stated,

So, to me it means knowing my students and like really knowing my students, their interests, their cultures, their home lives, you know, what makes them unique and then designing my learning for them to meet all of their needs and to be respectful and make sure in my teaching that there's nothing that would be offensive to any culture in the classroom.

Participant F stated,

Culturally relevant teaching means that I am able to teach all of my students regardless of their cultural backgrounds and with an end goal of improving student engagement and achievement. I like to think about this as a car analogy. Since I just bought a new Mustang, I'll use my Mustang. It can't just have a good engine to get from point A to point B, but it also has to have really good tires and the window
wipers have to work in case it rains. And I like to think about students like that. So culturally relevant teaching is just one part to helping to increase student engagement and achievement but it's a big part.

**Interview Question 3**

**Interview Question 3 asked, “What experiences have you had that have helped you understand the impact of race, culture and ethnicity on teaching and learning?”**

Participant A stated,

The one experience that I can think of is, I grew up in a town of all White people and I was a poor little farm girl that lived outside of town but went to that town school. Now I'm of a White race, I guess that'd be considered. But because I was poor, I was an outcast. I was treated differently and people looked down at me at the school and it just felt different at school. So, taking that experience to teaching and knowing that a lot of students, with different backgrounds, maybe they're poor, maybe they're African American, they feel sometimes less than, and I've seen that in students since I've been teaching. So, I take that experience that I had and I help my students feel better about themselves by instilling confidence in them.

Participant B stated,

I don't feel like I've had a lot of experiences. I mean I've learned over the years that some Arabic families show respect by not making eye contact. I don't know if there's anything that's been like a standout for me that you should or shouldn’t do. I haven't had any negative experiences when it comes to dealing with different races, ethnicities, or cultures. I've learned not everybody celebrates the same holidays and I try to learn a little bit more
about that. Nothing truly stands out on the way of negative or positive. To me, it's just kind of a way of life.

Participant C stated,

When I was reading these questions before, something came to mind immediately. It was many years where I really had to stop and think about how the kids are at school and then what they go home to, how their household is made up or the neighborhood that they are in. The particular incident that came to mind is about a young man we had at our school who had some behavior challenges once in a while. He really was a great kid with a great heart, and he was in a small group with me learning some social skills. We were talking about responding to people who start things with you who might insult you or try to start something up with you. And we were talking about using our words instead of our hands and, you know, being the bigger person to try to talk out a problem. He flat out said to me, “Miss Leech, I will do this at school, but this doesn't work in my neighborhood.” And I just really had to step back and think that he was probably right. That wasn't going to work in his neighborhood where he came from to try to approach problems in that way. So, it kind of opened my eyes.”

Participant D stated,

So, um, probably about 12 years ago or so, I had an Arabic boy in my classroom. Um, his dad was stationed at MacDill, he was a part of the Saudi Arabian government and the little boy was just not really doing a whole lot. And when I met with the dad, he was just very matter of fact and said to me, “He's a man and he doesn't really have to listen to what you're saying and you just need to respect him for the decisions he's choosing to make.” I mean, it was one of those, Oh my goodness, gracious sakes. My
eyes were just so blown up that I had a hard time assessing what was going on because I know growing up, kids in my family, kids, you did exactly what the adult around you told you to do. And when he, his dad was like, no, he, he doesn't have to, it was just a really big cultural difference. I learned that years and years and years ago.

Participant E stated,

So, I would definitely say when I was becoming an equity champion in the district, I spent 18 hours of learning and discussions with others and you know, having some hard conversations. Definitely, I think that helped me with that. And being able to see the data where we still have such huge gaps with our scores, definitely shows me the impact and it definitely shows me an impact on the kids and what we still have to do to be able to change to meet those needs and to change those scores to close that gap.

Participant F stated,

So, I like to think about my background as a child growing up. My father and my mother were both born and raised in different countries and they came over here as adults with their families, learning English as a second language and just learning how to survive in this country was very challenging and raising us as first-generation Americans. So I remember going to school and thinking, “What, what do you mean you don't have pig roasts in your backyard like we do? but just the cultural differences that I had growing up as my parents being new to this country and experiencing that with them. Also in the trainings that I've had in college and as a teacher for 20 years, in my ESOL classes, I was one of the teachers who chose to get
my ESOL endorsement in college even though it was not a requirement and kept me in college longer by a whole semester because I was very interested in other cultures and learning how to reach every single student that I could throughout my career. I've done some extensive traveling around the world to a lot of different countries and I was very fortunate and lucky to do that. But I like to study the cultures before I go there so that I can fit in and understand how to fit in.

**Interview Question 4**

Interview Question 4 asked, “How do you create equity in the classroom or your environment?”

Participant A stated,

To be fair to all of my students, I consider each and every one of them as an individual and, allow them certain things that give them the benefit that everyone else has so to speak. So, for example, if somebody needs to stand and move about, I'm going to let them stand up at their desk and they're going to have a back seat in the back of my room. As long as they can handle that. Or if someone needs attention and they need to be in the front of the room to learn better, I'll put them in the front of the room, always saying hello and their name and just attending to their needs. I think this is how I try to be fair on a social level and I think that that then helps to build confidence and helps them want to be at school and to perform better.

Participant B stated,

You know, when it comes to that, I can't say I treat them all equal because they're not equal. Every kid has strengths, every kid has weaknesses. So, I give them what they need to be successful in the
classroom, whether it be a little more or a little less depending on the needs of the child.

Participant C stated,

I guess I try to make sure that my lessons, whether it be a full classroom or a small group, that I provide the supports that are needed for the different kids in that classroom. One example that comes to mind, I was doing a lesson in a third-grade teacher’s room and she has two students who do not speak any English at all. I think they started to get better towards the end of the year. But I would make sure to pair them with a bilingual student so that as we were going through our lesson it would give them the chance to translate so that they could participate fully in the lesson. Also, you want to look at your students who may have a learning disability or have difficulty reading and make sure that you are supporting what they need and just not expecting them to work on it in the same way as everyone else.

Another example that comes to my mind is I've done a lesson with fourth grade over the last few years, about inventions made by mistake and talking about not being afraid to make mistakes, how some of these things that we have every day were actually made because someone made a mistake, for example, a microwave oven, the potato chip, the chocolate chip cookie, ice cream cones. As I was going through the different inventions that I could use in my lesson, I made sure that I tried to show a variety of cultures like the ice cream cone was made by a middle Eastern man at the world's fair, and the potato chip was made by an African American cook. So, I just tried to make sure that I represented all the different cultures in my examples.

Participant D stated,
I would say that I feel like community materials helps create equity when kiddos don't have to worry about having the needed materials. I don't want to call it like being a lack of being prepared. I just know that so many of our kiddos come from such varied backgrounds that coming in with a sharpened number two pencil just isn't an option for all of our kids. So, if we can have bins of everything that they need here at their job to be successful, then I think that really helps. Setting up guidelines for discussions that show that all voices matter and all ideas are respected. You don't have to agree with it, you don't have to like it, but you do have to respect the person that had the bravery enough to speak it. So, I think those are some different ways to create equity.

Participant E stated,

So, I try to make sure that I have a lot of books in my classroom, library and resources that represent a diverse mix of cultures. I also try to make sure that I randomly pair my students so that they get to learn about other students and their cultures and different things. There's a lot of movement I use in the classroom and I try to design the learning to kind of pique the interest of the kids.

Participant F stated,

I create equity in the classroom by, number one, focusing on inclusion and openness. I like to teach my students conversation moves to help them to learn how to agree and disagree with their peers, to explicitly teach the classroom expectations and how the classroom is going to be run, by making sure I call on every single student because I valued their answers, their thinking, and their opinions, by interviewing students to get to know them better, by designing multicultural lessons, by having different types
of learning stations and also inviting guest speakers into the classroom

Interview Question 5

Interview Question 5 asked, “What’s important to you in understanding the cultural background of your students?”

Participant A stated,

It's just important for me to know every student on a personal level. For example, sometimes I go online. I had a couple of students that were both from Bosnia this last year and in second grade, and I went online to kind of figure out what their culture was to help me understand what their home life might be like, what, how they feel about education. One of the things that I recall I have taught summer school and a school that is primarily students with parents from Mexico, they all speak Spanish. And my first year there, it was very, very challenging. And so, what I figured out was what does school mean to people of Mexican descent, how can I communicate with them and work with them, to better their children’s learning. So, I looked up, wow, you know, what, what they look for in a teacher or how they contribute to the classroom and found that parents generally leave all the teaching to the teacher. They think very highly of the teacher. But when there is a celebration, that's when the families are going to come in and help and contribute. I'm going to provide everything you need. What else do you need? They're willing to do all of the celebrating and all of the hard work that's associated with that celebration. So, it's those kinds of things that I do to try to understand my kids and where they come from.

Participant B stated,
I just don't want to offend anyone. This year, I was surprised by when I asked what they did for Mother's Day—he told me that they don't celebrate Mother's Day in their country. That surprised me. Then he expanded on it. In his county they call it something different and they do it on a different day, but it's not necessarily Mother's Day. So, it was interesting to find out.

I think that's one of the areas that I think I would like to change for next year. I give parents a paper that welcomes them and asks them to tell me about what they want your child to learn and stuff like that. But, I would like to learn more about their backgrounds. So, I think that would be interesting add to this sheet—like some of the holidays that they celebrate or their beliefs. I just to make sure that I'm not offending anyone or maybe I can share those times that are important to them with the class, and not just the American cultures and holidays. I could even ask them if there was something that they would like to come in and share with the classroom at a certain time. This way I can have a speaker come in and it's not just coming from me.

Participant C stated,

Some things I'd like to try to understand are how in their culture they are to relate to people in authority over them and how they are to show respect. I know years ago we were doing some training on the way the brain works and it was taught, you know, have the student look you in the eye so that they are using the reasoning part of their brain. Well, for some cultures that's disrespectful for a student to look an elder straight in the eye. So that's one of those things we have to try and find a balance with. Also talking to students about how they celebrate different holidays, the importance of education in their family and in their culture. So, I think that gives you
a better picture when you are trying to assist that student through any difficulties.

Participant D stated,

I think it's connections. You know, I want to connect with every kiddo that comes through those library doors and trying to understand what their life is like outside of school. That helps build those connections. Getting to know the students, knowing if they're with mom, grandma, what's going on with them, what their interests are. You know, just so I can get to know them better, I mean my ulterior motive would be to find the best book ever, but also so that they know that there's someone asking about them and someone who cares to know what's going on.

Participant E stated,

So, learning about what is important to my students, their beliefs and to make sure to truly understand them. I like to have a parent interview form go home to be filled out so that they can tell me anything that they feel comfortable telling me about their child so that I know more about them; same thing with having the students share what they want me to know about them.

Participant F stated,

Well, it's important for me to understand their language, their culture, their values, their family dynamics, and their home environment. But really it's important not to over generalize cultural norms. So just because the student is from Albania, he might not have the same values or beliefs as an Albanian does. So, reaching out and getting to know each student as an individual is really important to me and that's when building relationships with students and families is the most important thing that I can do.
Interview Question 6

Interview Question 6 asked, Specifically, what do you do to learn about your students’ cultural background?

Participant A stated,

Oh, well specifically I just really try to get to know the students and the parents and understand what they need from me so that I can be the best support and teacher to those students. So, I just really try to get to know them on a personal level. Every single student.

Participant B stated,

Well, and that's an area that I think that I am lacking in. Typically, I just talk to the kids about it. I ask how they do things at home, about their holidays, and where they come from. I did an interview with two of my kids this year because they came from other countries. The things that one of them had seen was just broken hearted. He came from an area where it was being taken over. They were afraid to walk in the streets. They had been attacked in the streets before. He's only in third grade and he fought with a bat because he’d attacked by what they call the bad guys. He explained how the bad guys are trying to take over the government and they're not following the rules. His family lived in fear.

I think of our kids here, they don't really get that, but he's seen it. He has such a different perspective on it. It was just heartbreaking and I'm glad that he is here in the U.S. and safe. You don't think about that. They’re only in third grade, that's a young age. So, you don't think about the kids experiencing things like that. He talked about political agendas, you know, he mentioned that there were political
agendas and religious agendas and he could expand on it. It's almost like he—I'd like to say he understood it. I think he's definitely listened to a lot of conversations from his family and has been involved with those conversations. It really surprised me because I don't think a lot of the students in my class could really tell me what's going on in the news today, but he had witnessed it firsthand.

Participant C stated,

I think mainly you talk with them. Sometimes that's a little more difficult with me not being in the classroom with them every day, all day. But when I do get to talk with kids individually or if they're in small group with me I like to have them tell me about different things that are going on in their family and in their culture—especially around, you know, certain holidays or even in dealing in small groups or individual counseling with an approach to solving a certain problem. Sometimes, you know, I've had students share with me that maybe in their culture it's not common that a kid would go to their parent with an issue, things like that. So basically, you know, through conversation.

Participant D stated,

I know when I was in a class, I displayed a world map, and the students would, at the very beginning of the year, put like little flags or pins in the map to represent where they were from. And then as we read different books throughout the year, any article, wherever if it was nonfiction, where it was written or what it was written about, fiction, where the setting was, we would add more to really kind of see how this whole big place is connected and where we can make connections between ourselves and the characters that we're reading about. I also know that just talking with the kids
about their weekends, their nights, you know, et cetera, it just tells you what they value. You know, when they, when they talk about, well, we did this for dinner. I made the assumption that all families sit at home every night and have dinner together first because that's important to me. And when the kids are like, no, we had dinner in the car. So, I think just kind of, getting to know them more once again, going back to building those connections.

Participant E stated,

I guess that's—it kind of goes back to Question 5. For the students, I also give them student interest surveys so they can tell me about them. I also meet with my students individually at the beginning of the year when assessing, I always take some time to have some personal conversations with them. It's important to build those relationships, they share more and more with you, so you’re able to understand more that way.

Participant F stated,

Well, number one, I pronounce their names correctly. It took me about a week to learn how to pronounce Etjen's name and the way he would perceive if anyone mispronounced his name would make him feel bad. I explained to him that it's not pronounced the way it's written and it’s a very unique name and it will just take some time to remember how to pronounce his name correctly. But that's a really important part of getting to know our students and respecting them, taking time to get to know them, showing interest in who they are and what they value and believe. I have a lot of conversations with them in order to get to know them and their interests. An Avid strategy, which can be aligned to Cultural Relevant Teaching, is name tags with their
interests for randomizing groups to help them to feel connected to their peers. For example, Kristy Bench came in and showed us how to implement this strategy during a staff training. For example, in one of the corners of the name tags, students list what they want to be when they grow up. And they might feel connected to their peers if three of them want to be doctors when they grow up and you can group them that way for a learning activity. This would also involve movement, which is also aligned to CRT. Another way is through surveys in order to get to know them and journal responses where they can write their opinions or share their thoughts or beliefs.

**Interview Question 7**

Interview Question 7 asked, Describe the instructional strategies you use in your classroom to help all students learn.

Participant A stated,

Well, there's a lot of things that we do. I always make sure that they know what we're learning for that day, the I can statement or the essential question that we're learning that day. I always make sure that we do a review so that if students maybe were absent the day before or, maybe didn't, don't remember what we did, cause I know even when I walk out of the room, sometimes it escapes me. So, we do a review, making connections to their lives. So, I think I mentioned it before, for example, I may point out, if you're baking, that's something you can do with measurement. One of my past students said, “Oh, my dad's a builder and um, he uses a measuring tape. Is that the same thing as we're doing?” My response was, “Oh yeah. It's the same thing. Tell me about what your dad's doing.” I encouraged him to go home and talk to his dad about that and come back to share. So, I always try to make connections with
each of their lives and that makes it exciting for them cause it makes it real. I try to keep it centered so less of me, more of them.

Participant B stated,

My kids, as you know, they're behind. So, it takes learning a lot of different strategies for them to be successful, to be able to apply them to multiple subject areas. Some of them are note taking strategies, graphic organizers; we do a lot of interactive learning, trying to get them to collaborate to build their oral language skills. It requires working together because their vocabulary is behind as well. I teach how to use context clue to be able to figure out what vocabulary words mean. I give them extra picture support and have extra conversations to be able to expand on those, as well as using their vocabulary notebooks. My small group instruction is direct or explicit and systematic, because my students are catching up to grade-level academics, I think that phonics needs to be taught in an organized and systematic way. I use the gradual-release model, especially when it comes to the writing aspect of it. I also use it for math. I've done collaborative circles and Socratic circles. They love that, especially for opinion writing. That's pretty much what I do.

Participant C stated,

I try not to make my lessons just me in the front of the room talking. It is difficult sometimes when you're not already in the classroom to bring a ton of materials, but I try to make sure that all of my lessons have at least something visual, whether it be a book or a PowerPoint. I love to incorporate something into my lesson where students are writing or at least maybe making something with the younger grades so that they're using their hands as well, making sure they're always engaged by not just
staying in one part of the room but circulating through the room and checking in with individual students to see how they're doing. I also really try, but sometimes I'm not as successful at this as I want to be, of not always calling on those kids that raise their hand. Instead I to try to look for those kids who aren't raising their hand to try to pull them in to the conversation.

Participant D stated,

I would say like trying to use a variety of texts with which showcase a variety of cultures. I also think that making the learning as visible as possible is helpful. I know kiddos, especially some of our ASD kiddos, really rely on that routine. I was talking with Ms. Burns and she was just saying how even during this distance learning she has set up this routine that has really helped the students to adjust. And to be able to do something like that virtually is pretty impressive. I think reading the room and when you see that through that sea of blank faces, either they're not connecting with the book or I started speaking a foreign language and understanding right then and there to stop and figure out what's going on. Where did we lose track, where did the breakdown in communication occur so that we can figure out how to pull them back into either what I'm trying to teach or get them back to caring about the characters.

Participant E stated,

So, students are placed in collaborative groups, usually by ability, but sometimes it changes depending on what we're learning. It changes through the year, so students get opportunities to work with multiple students and different personalities. I use a lot of movements in the classroom and I use a lot of exit tickets so that I understand where they are, what they're learning from the lesson, where their misconceptions are,
and just making sure to give them time to talk to each other about the learning and let them lead as much as possible to make it more student centered. The students definitely need some kind of movement to um, help kind of solidify learning, get their brains moving again. I do use music too. They really liked music in the classroom. Sometimes we do it for transitions sometimes to, you know, move from group to group or other places. So, it definitely impacts them because if I forget to play music, sometimes they'll be like, ah, you didn't play music. So, I think it really does just connect that learning cause people are so different, whether they're visual learners or they're kinesthetic and trying to incorporate these things kind of helps hit all of those for the kids.

Participant F stated,

Some of the strategies that I use are print rich environment, making sure the classroom is colorful and inviting for my students, that students are arranged in learning groups, to have different types of library setup, to have easy access to technology, displaying their student work; rules, procedures, and protocols are defined and easily accessible, restorative circles happening in the classroom daily to get to know them and to problem-solve, learning centers, graphic organizers, and other AVID strategies and also ESE strategies. Some techniques that I use in my classroom are call and respond, action thermometer, think-pair-share, pick a stick, music around the room, and bottoms up heads together.

**Interview Question 8**

**Interview Question 8 was an inquiry:** Describe the training and staff development, related to Culturally Responsive Teaching, you have participated in.
Participate A stated,

So yeah, the CRT training was profound. The one that that I spoke of previously. But I also remember Chris McCormack doing his CRT training and I took away two major things that I use every single day in my classroom and one is circles. In my classroom we do a circle in the morning, every day of the week. It's just a connection. It gets everybody’s talking out, everybody's, you know, wiggles out. And it also allows for the students to connect to one another, on all levels. And we do circles also when there's a class, an entire class issue that I think needs to be dealt with. And it works well because it brings out points of view from all different students and helped all different students consider the other person's point of view. The other thing that I love is when there is a disagreement between two students or an issue occurs and I need to talk with them, I use the talking points provided to talk to them separately, ask them how they would feel if this happened to you, what do you think you should do now? Kind of putting the ball in their court instead of me just reprimanding but giving them the ball to pass back and forth and then to make amends.

Participant B stated,

Well, I had to look those up. I did the CRT training, that was the 12-hour one. I've done an Equity training. I've done Restorative Practices and using effective circles. Those are pretty much the ones that I have taken more recently. It seems to be a new way that the County is going. Honestly, it's stuff I've always done, but now they just have it in writing and have you take more trainings on them.

Participant C stated,

I know we've done a lot within our own staff meetings and last summer I did do the
two day culturally relevant training. I thought, it was probably one of the better trainings I've been to in this district. I really enjoyed that.

Participant D stated,

Okay, so that'd be want a hundred percent honest. I went on to the PLN to look at courses that I had taken at work. That's really rare. I couldn't find any, so unless we've done it just through like staff meetings, um, I don't know that I've actually taken full on culturally relevant teaching somewhere in the title course or training. I don’t know if I should just add the AVID CRT or leave this.

Participant E stated,

So, I did attend the AVID CRT training which gives multiple strategies on how to group students, icebreakers learning groups, um, things like Socratic seminars and circles. We also did at a whole collaborative group training at school through AVID. That was something that was helpful with CRT as well.

Participant F stated, “I have taken the 12-hour culturally relevant teaching back in 2018 and I am signed up for the 3-hour culturally relevant classroom training in June.”