RACIAL AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH THE EYES OF PUBLIC-SCHOOL EDUCATORS

Laquita McMillion

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RACIAL AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH THE EYES OF PUBLIC-SCHOOL EDUCATORS

Laquita M. McMillion
Curriculum, Advocacy, and Policy
Doctor of Education
In the National College of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education

National College of Education
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RACIAL AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE
THROUGH THE EYES
OF
PUBLIC-SCHOOL EDUCATORS

Laquita M. McMillion
EDD Teaching and Learning Major:
Curriculum, Advocacy, & Policy

Approved:

Sara Green
Chair, Dissertation Committee

Jennifer McMillion
Director, Doctoral Program

Todd Price
Member, Dissertation Committee

Dean’s Representative

Dean, National College of Education
01/10/2022
Date Approved
Abstract

The discussion of racial and cultural competence in public schools today is necessary. The student population of public schools across the United States has significantly grown racially and culturally diverse. Through the use of a narrative inquiry and a critical lens, this study explored the perception and experiences of public-school educators focused on the topic of racial and cultural competence as it relates to their classroom practice and educational policies. The focus of this research (1) describes and analyzes my personal experiences through the use of qualitative approaches, (2) shares the experiences and perceptions of three public-school educators, and (3) advocate for coursework on the topic of racial and cultural competence to be embedded within teacher preparation programs. Data was collected using oral histories, in-depth one-on-one interviews, and a document review. The following themes were identified: (a) Identity is Foundation, (b) Preparation Matters, (c) Defining is Difficult, (d) Policy Creates Tension. This research provides implications to support parents, community members, and educators in their journey of improving school environments for students of color.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the professors. Upon entry into the program, Dr. Terry Smith patiently guided me to explore and believe in myself while encouraging me through literature to challenge systems. Developing my love to examine educational policies was grown by Dr. Todd Price. I would not have been able to push through this dissertation without the love and mindset of Dr. Sara Efron. Thank you for always standing firm on this process, even when the truth would hurt.

Without my grandmother’s encouragement, the late Annie McMillion, I would not have attempted this success. May your spirit live through my writing. To my “Bigma,” it is because of your prayers and protection that I can enter into the true blessings that this doctoral journey has afforded me. It is your resilience that I’ve harnessed in times of uncertainty. Thank you to Chrystina, Samantha, and D’andre, who stepped in to be parents when I was too busy with studies; your loyalty is not in vain. My village of love, support, and words of encouragement has been endless. I appreciate the encouragement from my family, “The Fan4”, and many friends and colleagues.

To Nyla: You have shared your entire life with mommy and her studies. Since the day you were born, I’ve been enrolled in school. You’ve stood beside me from my senior year of high school, bachelor's, master’s, and now my doctorate. I can never thank you for enduring the most significant sacrifice, time. May my successes be a pathway to your countless blessings, breaking generational curses. I pray you can stand in complete comfort knowing that you were the drive to all that I have achieved, and God made no mistake when allowing me to be your mother.
This dissertation is dedicated to my fellow turnaround school teachers. May your passion drive you to positively impact the lives of communities who need you the most.

The work of great educators can never be ignored.
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the challenge is to continually question assumptions and our historical use of education to socialize and normalize, and we may need to change what we unconsciously see as "normal". We need to be open to all our students' "normals" and help them retain their cultural identities while learning to function in multiple cultures (Moule, 2008)

There's not a day that passes in which I do not wonder if my race has anything to do with how I am treated by other individuals that I come into contact with. I developed a conscious, and yet sometimes-unconscious, sense of apprehension with individuals who I'm not acquainted with professionally or personally. When they meet me in person, do they make assumptions about my character based solely on my race? Is it their race or their actions that determine the level to which I can comfortably engage in conversation with them? The silent thoughts in my head are intensified when I'm the only African American in a room full of people. I proceed to scan the crowd, focusing on noticing those individuals who are looking in my direction. I analyze facial expressions and comments with a more critical lens than I would if I was in the comfort of my friends and family. There are overwhelming feelings that begin to shift my emotions and awaken my inner peace when discussions of historical injustices in America are discussed amongst a group of people. I can feel myself putting up an invisible protective shield and listening actively, yet prepared to defend myself or my culture when necessary. As I reflect on all of these thoughts that provoke strong emotions and still leave me with unanswered questions, I believe that it emerges in response to the knowledge I've obtained concerning the historical experiences encountered by my African American ancestors. This way of
thinking intersects with my identity as an educator in a classroom full of students from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds.

During my childhood, feeling the need to focus on my race was never a priority. I had lived in Chicago, Illinois, for the majority of my life. Between the ages of seven and ten, I attended two public schools in small towns of Arkansas and Oklahoma. While I knew from looking around that I was a minority, I cannot recall having any negative encounters related to my race. I enjoyed being a child and was allowed to play with anyone who wanted to have fun with me. I was more aware of my family's financial status in comparison to my peers than our different racial backgrounds. However, as I've grown into adulthood, my awareness of race as it relates to identity and presence within a global world has intensified. I began focusing on my racial identity and that of others upon entering my journey as an urban educator within the public-school system. In addition to experiencing this organization through the lens of an educator, I've had the opportunity of graduating from one its' elementary schools during my adolescent years. During my first year of teaching within a nonprofit school management organization, I encountered an abundance of epiphanies that have positioned me to question the institution and culture of educational organizations that serve minority students. One instance, in particular, occurred my second year of being a teacher of record.

During the middle of the school day, a security guard stepped into my fourth-grade classroom and motioned for me to walk towards him for a discussion. While my students continued reading independently, I stepped outside the classroom door. Standing in the hallway was the 6th-grade male student whom I had never had an interaction with. The student was standing against the wall with his hands folded into a fist, face
scrunched, and eyes moist with a shred of glaze evidence he recently cried and was extremely upset. The security guard explained that the gentleman was asked to leave his classroom after being continuously disruptive and disrespectful during an assessment. He continued with a request for me to allow the student to sit inside my class until the end of the school day to avoid receiving further disciplinary action. As I'm accustomed to permitting students for behavioral concerns to refocus themselves within my classroom, I began to ponder why this was a frequency within my school building. Was the recognition of having strength in the area of classroom management and student relationship building the reason for these frequent occurrences? Or was it because I shared the same race as our student population and the other 97% of the teaching staff did not? With little time to consider these two questions, I softly prompted the young man to begin to walk towards me so that we could enter my classroom together. With hesitation, he started to remove his body from the wall. I firmly repeated my directions and walked closer to the student while explaining that I wanted to help him and also go back to my responsibility as the fourth-grade teacher. He immediately began to move towards my classroom door. I allowed the student to sit for 15 minutes and observe my students making a transition into their peer groups for discussion. As my students discussed their book summaries, I engaged in a conversation with the student to surface what triggered the disruption and disrespectful behavior in his classroom.

McMillion: You look calm now.

Student: I am.

McMillion: So, explain to me why you got put out of your class.
**Student:** Ms. B wouldn’t give me help with my Baseline test. *(Baseline is a formative assessment that the network uses to measure student proficiency on Common Core state standards; a pseudo is used for the assessment)*

**McMillion:** Well, she can’t *help* you with the test.

**Student:** But it was asking me some questions I have never seen before. She didn't teach us that.

**McMillion:** well, what else could you have done besides getting angry with her because you didn’t know the material that was on the test?

**Student:** I don’t know.

**McMillion:** Did she explain to you that the Baseline test doesn’t mean anything? That it’s not that important for you, and you don’t have to stress about what you don’t know?

**Student:** (looking with a surprised face) No!

**McMillion:** Well, I’m telling you that information. What did you do after you got upset?

**Student:** I started to yell out, and she said stop, and I kept doing it and then she put me out.

**McMillion:** All of this could have been avoided. Now you're sitting here with me doing nothing while you should be in your class. Answer me this. Would you have done this same thing if you were in Ms. O's classroom?

**Student:** (looks up quickly and then looks down) Yup.

**McMillion:** Oh, really. What would have been her response to you?

**Student:** She wouldn’t go for it.

**McMillion:** So why do you feel the need to go and try it with Ms. B?

**Student:** I don’t know.
As the conversation continued, the student provided detailed comparisons of his two teachers. He explained that Ms. O holds every student in her classroom to a high expectation as it relates to discipline and the learning process, she gives her time before and after school to support students through their work. She allows them to speak openly about the challenges they are experiencing in their personal lives. He expressed that he struggles with completing assignments in both of his classes, but he puts in more effort to complete Ms. O's class assignments because she always is there to help when the activity becomes too difficult. On the other hand, his description of Ms. B's classroom environment demonstrated a stark contrast to his experiences in Ms. O's classroom. I sat listening to the voice of a young black male student who was able to distinguish between the different styles of teaching and classroom environments in the same school building with two separate teachers. I was finally taking the time to hear not only a student but a mind that was being shaped by adults who were trained, alongside me, to become excellent teachers with a distinct focus on knowing how to educate urban students. A part of me was also hearing and seeing myself inside the students' perspective. Silently, I was screaming on the inside wondering if the training on being a culturally competent educator resonated with only a portion of my colleagues. I wondered if cultural considerations were made during the disruptive behavior that could have prevented him from being placed out of his classroom.

This experience, in combination with other similar interactions, has led me to ponder multiple questions as I attempt to explore my own life experiences as an African American educator understanding the role and importance of racial and cultural competence in public schools. While I have relationships with both teachers, the student
spoke about, the new voice concerning their styles of teaching was more intriguing than I was accustomed to. It was not some information being presented by a formal evaluator concerning their practice in the classroom. The voice I was hearing was a first-hand account of the impact of the training we all had received to become exceptional teachers for urban students. Through my inquisitive nature, I've become interested in understanding the qualities that distinguish educators who are considered racially and culturally competent to their counterparts who can be described as lacking cultural awareness. I've posed myself and others with questions such as: What characteristics allow a student to communicate a stronger relationship with a specific teacher in a school building of ethnically diverse teachers? In the particular situation discussed, the student communicated that he (who is African American) favored Ms. O (European American) over Ms. B (African American). From the quick discussion with the student, it seemed that his decision was based on characteristics that involved each teachers’: (1) relationship with the majority of students in their classroom, (2) unique teaching style approaches, and (3) the teachers' ability to effectively communicate the connectedness of instruction to the experiences of his peers and his community.

As my wonderings and occurrences with such situations as described increased, my curiosity enhanced with questions such as: Does an educators’ understanding of students' cultural upbringing advance their ability to build relationships with their students? Is there a skill set, involving race and culture, that teachers acquire to become competent? Is there a developmental process that could be introduced to teacher candidates and practicing educators that would allow them to motivate students
academically despite their cultural differences? These questions are still unresolved and, coupled with my experiences, have become the fuel for my scholarly writing.

**Purpose Statement**

The focus of this research writing explored the perspectives of three public school educators serving a diverse student population. The following research questions will inform this exploration:

1. How do educators construct the meaning of racial and cultural competence?
2. What are these educators’ perspectives on how racial and cultural competence can provide support to the academic success of a diverse student population?
3. How do these educators describe and enact the curriculum based on the racial and cultural backgrounds of their students?

This academic exploration will present the lived experiences of the participants as they consider the topic of racial and cultural competence in their career. I do not intend to assess the effectiveness or evaluate the level for which educators are defined as culturally competent. Instead, I will use this research to (1) describe and analyze my personal experiences through the use of qualitative approaches, (2) share the experience of public-school educators engaging in a reflection on the process for racial and cultural competence as it relates to their classroom practice and (3) advocate for coursework on the topic of racial and cultural competence to be embedded within teacher preparation programs. I believe the discussion of racial and cultural competence and the need to seek teachers of color in public schools today is necessary. I acknowledge that my own sociocultural and professional positionings impact the lens through which I explore these
issues. The topic of this research has been developed based on my personal experiences, intellectual curiosity, and agency for social justice.

**Significance**

I’ve always known who I was until what I knew came into contact with "new" discoveries. The experiences are considered "new" not because they had yet to exist in the world, but new for the distinct encounter in which I’ve become more familiar with the information. This description provides some unique insight into my journey of becoming a doctoral student. Aspiring to become an educator in my high school years was a calling for me. Despite considering a career in the world of business to gain financial wealth, I acknowledged teaching children who looked like me and came from a similar racial background as I had was crucial. I needed to give back to the school system that embraced me. Also, I wanted to ensure that someone else got to experience the world beyond their family’s socioeconomic status. I graduated from college in December 2012 and immediately was given the opportunity of teaching second grade at the school in which I had conducted my student teaching. My first year of teaching was unlike the stories of veteran teachers I'd encountered during my undergraduate career. Being familiar with the staff and having a peer from my college also hired into the building was comforting.

On the other hand, being in an environment with majority veteran teachers, was intimidating and left me feeling like an easy target for criticism. Teachers spoke of my professional demeanor as being "too passionate". They described my instructional practices as teaching "my heart out" while unbelievably trying methods that would never work with "these kids". All of the comments had me convinced that I was in the wrong
environment, an environment that would never allow me to advance in my practice. Only one month into my first year of teaching, I made the decision that I needed to seek the opportunity of educating elsewhere and maintain my hopes of furthering my knowledge in the educational field. While searching for a new chance, I became aware that gaining experience in theoretical knowledge and research practices could advance my professional career and, ultimately, my practice within the classroom. What I did not know at that time was how and where I would embark on this quest.

I began an urban teacher residency in June 2013. I entered the program with some prior knowledge about the organization, given that I had been a student within one of the network's first elementary turnaround schools. While I hoped this distinct perspective would navigate me through the journey, I would soon learn that this experience would heighten and intensify the inner advocate within me. The focus of the residency was to ensure that teachers were equipped and prepared to teach in high-need schools within urban communities. During the first few sessions with the program, there were many conversations and keynote speakers who spoke on how intense the year would be. The resonating advice highlighted the importance of (1) residents needing to trust the process of the network that operated the school sites where we would be trained, (2) realizing in the beginning that everyone wouldn't make it through the rigorous residency, (3) and most important was for residents to be quick to observe but slow to judge when engaging in our school placements. These important taglines would be reiterated throughout the program. As a result, I always ponder the correlation between the significant points and the experiences my peers and I encountered that year. It soon became apparent, in my opinion, that these frontloaded expectations could be used to convince residents that the
suspicious or questionable circumstances that occurred within the network were only coincidental. It seemed that we were to believe our observations were not attached to a more extensive system of control and were merely established expectations for the institutional culture that we were experiencing. Kezar and Eckel define institutional culture as the embedded patterns, behaviors, shared values, beliefs, and ideologies of an educational institution (as cited in Kustra et al., 2015). These patterns occur before and after individuals have entered into the institution. An institution is a socially constructed belief system about the way things are, and the way things should be that organizes human thought and action (Stein, 1997). In this research, I refer to the definition of institutional culture as a constructed set of values, beliefs, and language that must be modeled through actions and verbal communication. In my observation, to remain within the residency program that is discussed in this writing, individuals must adhere to the institutional culture without employing critical judgments. If anyone chooses to contradict the traditional institutional culture, they will risk their position within the network.

Once entering my assigned school site, it became more apparent that I was operating in an institutional culture that had repetitive patterns of rules, beliefs, and norms that must be followed to be accepted as an exceptional educator. No one could question a directive that was given, teachers had limited voice about the day-to-day happenings in the classroom, creativity was limited to the design of your bulletin board, and staff members never honestly conversed with each other. For me, the most problematic aspect of the institutional culture rested in the hyper-focus for managing the behavior of students to be quiet over 90% of the school day. Students rarely got a chance
to converse with each other except for occasional days in the lunchroom, recess, and as planned in their teachers' instructional protocol. I knew that the behaviors and beliefs for operating an underperforming school set forth through the network were extreme.

On the other hand, I witnessed only a small number of residents who objected to being an active participant in such an environment in which they possessed limited control. There was no ability to decide on how to implement instructional lessons, and more importantly, appropriate professionalism for student interaction. Classrooms seemed to work like well-oiled machines, and everything was routine and was governed by a procedure and protocol. The process of turning around schools in this environment can be described best by the work of Shaw & Reyes (1992):

If school machines were run more efficiently, if quality control measures were more rigorous, if production goals were increased, and if management would get tough and take control, then the product (student learning) would be significantly improved.

From a business perspective, this would be the best algorithm for opening a school and ensuring the success of students. In a more humanistic view, there are many factors not considered for a school building that the city has deemed as underperforming. As uncomfortable as the residency made my peers and me feel, none of us verbally communicated this with the program directors and staff. I continued to engage as expected, yet hoping that the year would be over, and I would gain a “seat at the table” to voice my inquiries once I was a teacher of record.
Since the program allowed residents to develop the skills necessary to support students who must overcome challenges such as poverty, trauma, underachievement and opportunity gaps, I remained focused on completion. I spent much of the residency year in a rut. I couldn't accept the reality that the network I thought would be more of a proponent of education for minority students, had become school buildings that seemed identical based on an intentionally constructed institutional culture. I was disappointed in myself for remaining silent to directives that were not focused on positively impacting the academic achievement for all students, students who were like me. How could I suppress my voice in this space out of fear of authority only to gain more professional benefits? These benefits outweighed the advance degree I would obtain in just a year.

While being a resident teacher Monday through Thursday required me to be silenced, the degree coursework on Friday left me with a voice naming this system I was operating within. It was the surfacing of the topic of culture that began to support my inquiry. I distinctly remember a professor asking my cohort during our first-class session, "when this program is over, I want you to evaluate which was more beneficial for you: the degree focused on urban education or the resident training in the schools with urban students?". As I reflect on that question, I know that the knowledge I gained for the degree had provided a pathway for me to advocate against the travesties in education. Three courses, in particular, helped to give me the opportunity to name the system I was experiencing: Social and Cultural Politics of Education, Cross Cultural Education, Culturally Responsive Classroom Environment. Within each course, I gained specific insights and understanding intended to support educators in deconstructing the cultural context of schools. The course on social and cultural politics of education allowed
educators to ponder the moral and ethical obligations of educators that reflect a commitment to democratic schools and social justice. Broadening our knowledge of students, the course on Cross Culture Education allowed the exploration of behavior and learning styles of diverse students. Using this knowledge, we were able to design instruction to promote academic success. Building on that foundational knowledge, the course of Culturally Responsive Classroom Environment required us to create a comprehensive plan to develop a culturally responsive classroom environment. Given the immersion into such valuable coursework with knowledgeable professors, was the beginning of the personal significance that developed the topic for this scholarly exploration. I was only at the peak of igniting my ability to sense-making. Sensemaking refers to any attempt or process to determine the meaning systems in which one is operating (Murrell, 2007, p.47). Through those particular courses, I was able to construct the meaning of my professional and personal identity once it collided with the institutional culture within the network in which I was employed and had signed a four-year contractual agreement to remain within.

Consequently, this sense-making process prompted an unconscious concern for me that seemed to consistently resurface as I spent the next four years teaching in this institutional culture. The 2014 graduating class of the residency consisted of 150 educators, making a benchmark for 1,000 educators that had graduated from this program since the first class in 2003. Of the 150 residents, only 5 identified as educators of color. In my conscious mind, the reason I wanted to become an educator and complete a program focused on urban students of color supported my passion, and that seemed beneficial given the cultural match. Research has helped to explain this passion for
educators of color, indicating that these educators are motivated to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color (Achinstein et al. 2010). While I believed myself to be fully capable of educating students of color, in my unconscious mind, I was unable to recognize this same passion that my white peers embodied. I questioned the authenticity of their love to teach in urban schools consisting of predominantly African American and Latino children. The concern for a more diverse teacher workforce became the discussion I engaged in with my colleagues.

I wanted to become informed about the rationale for the low percentage of teachers of color seeking to support students of color. More importantly, I wanted to know if this was a single occurrence within my city or if there were other similarities in the field of education within the United States. Emily Deruy (2013) reported that an analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics data showed that students of color made up more than 45% of the PK–12 populations. In contrast, teachers of color made up only 17.5% of the educator workforce. While the field of education has produced a large amount of research indicating the issue of diversity in the teacher workforce being a concern, the policy to maintain the efforts of recruitment has been stagnant. In 2010, the U.S. Census reported that “just over one-third of the U.S. population reported their race and ethnicity as something other than non-Hispanic white alone (i.e. "minority"). This group increased from 86.9 million to 111.9 million between 2000 and 2010, representing a growth of 29 percent over the decade (United States Census Bureau, 2010). With the increase in population, there is a projection for increased diversity within the country. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) predicts that by the year 2024, white
students will represent 46 percent of public-school students, a drop from 2012 of 51 percent.

In comparison to the student population, the diversity of the teacher workforce is not as diverse. I had experienced this within my residency program and during my childhood academic career. The U.S. Census reported that the 2010 elementary and secondary teacher workforce in the United States was not as racially diverse as the population at large or the students. More surprisingly, the report found:

Compared to all teachers, Black and Hispanic teachers are employed in different kinds of schools as measured by the socio-economic and racial composition of students. High-poverty elementary and secondary schools employed a more significant percentage of black and Hispanic teachers and a smaller percentage of white teachers than did low-poverty schools, according to a 2007–08 NCES analysis. According to the data, among teachers working in high-poverty elementary and secondary schools, 63 percent were white, 16 percent were black, and 17 percent were Hispanic. In comparison, among teachers working in low-poverty schools, 92 percent were white, 3 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent were black. Teachers of color are also overwhelmingly employed in public schools serving student populations with relatively high proportions of students of color and public schools in urban communities (NCES, 2010).

This data begins to explain shifts that are occurring within education. Yet, I urge that there is a disconnect between the research conducted by NCES and practice as it relates to sharing the experiences of how practicing educators handle the realities of these changes. Researchers attest that teachers of color produce more favorable academic
results for students of color than can White teachers (as cited in Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). However, I firmly believe that the race of the educator is not as valuable as the mindset necessary to support students of color. Increasing the number of teachers within a school system to balance the racial backgrounds of the student population will not miraculously improve the academic achievement levels. Researchers Achinstein and Aguirre (2008), in their case study of 15 new teachers of color, analyzed the issues with the cultural match as the answer to the diversity amongst teacher workforce. In their writing, the researchers advocate the need to avoid the danger of (1) oversimplifying or essentializing a cultural matcher, (2) interrogate at an unproblematized assumption that teachers of color easily tap their cultural resources in practice with students of color, (3) within the context of classrooms there are many cultural conflicts (not just match or harmony) displayed through students and teachers negotiating their sociocultural identities in the context of U.S. urban schooling. In the case study, researchers were able to bring awareness to the unique socio-cultural challenges that are experienced by novice teachers of color. Their research highlighted (1) the complexity and negotiated meanings of cultures in classrooms, (2) the process of teachers questioning and challenging their sociocultural self-identifications and connectedness with students, and (3) calling to push for a move beyond cultural match to an understanding of sociocultural differences amid convergences among teachers and students of color. If the conversation shifted from the call for teachers of color into developing the skill set of educators, it would be imperative to explore racial and cultural competence.

As I reflect on the initial thoughts concerning my white counterparts, for which I used generalizations to form, I'm aware that my ability to comprehend the complexity of
culture and the empathy for how these same aspiring and practicing educators appreciated culture seemed nonexistent. It was not until I engaged in my doctoral studies that I began to understand and gain a research-supported rationale to confront my questions as to why my white peers were driven for the work of educating urban students. More importantly, I would be introduced to knowledge that explored and placed a call for establishing my urge to ensure the mindset necessary for educators to support today's students in public schools in America. Before my enrollment in my doctoral program, as an educator, I've had the opportunity to observe formally and informally the engagement of students and teachers within public schools. Also, I've reviewed administrative reports among schools in which I worked, which indicates a large percentage of discipline referrals that involve students' opting not to participate in instructional learning in the classroom (teacher-directed or peer-centered instruction). Within the reports, there are multiple perspectives and rationales from both the teacher and student to explain the refusal to engage in classroom instruction actively. While I argue that defiance can stem from a lack of student-teacher relationships, I will use this writing to advocate further policy related to focusing on improving the skill set of educators with a focus on racial and cultural competence. There is a call for more research to inform policy and practice as it relates to enhancing the ability of educators to utilize their knowledge of culture to support their students' who are of non-European American background with a focus on (1) building sustainable relationships (2) considering behaviors demonstrated within the context of the classroom and (3) planning and implementing instructional practices and curriculum with considerations of culture.
Definition of Key Terms and Concepts

Before I continue with my scholarly writing, several central concepts must be defined based on their presentation within this writing. Researchers have used a vast amount of terminology all of which share similar meanings to the term cultural competence, including but not limited to cultural appropriate (Au & Jordan, 1981), cultural proficiency (CampbellJones & Lindsey, 2014), cultural responsive (Cazden & Leggett, 1981), multicultural relevant, cultural awareness, cross-cultural competence, cultural sensitivity, multicultural competence (Fouad & Arrendondo, 2007), and cultural intelligence (Earley & Soon, 2003). Diller and Moule (2005) describe cultural competence as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in system, agency, or among professionals enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. According to Diller and Moule, the term culture is used to imply the pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. Also, both authors define the term competency as having the capacity to function effectively. While this definition seeks to define cultural competence as a restricted set of attributes, it acknowledges the reality that individuals will encounter situations that require them to respond to support others from different cultures. To develop cultural competence, Diller and Moule claim the process entails developing particular personal and interpersonal awareness’s and sensitivities, learning specific bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills, that taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching. The construct of cultural competence comprises two components, knowledge and praxis (National Council for Accreditation of
Teacher Education, 2008; Yang & Montgomery, 2011). Knowledge is an understanding of cultures, cultural differences, and awareness of stereotypes and biases. Praxis refers to the application of skills, strategies, and pedagogical practices to help teachers successfully work with students from diverse backgrounds. Equipped with knowledge and praxis, teachers can become culturally competent to provide effective instructional practices to students (NCATE, 2008).

For educators, their competency can be observed through their relationships with students, the climate of their classroom environment, and in some cases, the academic growth and achievement of their students. Researchers Obidah and Teel (2008), define the term *racial and cultural competence* as a teachers’ awareness of power imbalances in classrooms concerning differences related to race (their own and that of others) and culture. These researchers emphasize the definition takes into consideration that the White dominant culture has been allowed to set up the winners as those who fit its mold. For this scholarly work, I utilize the definition of racial and cultural competence as defined by Obidah and Teel, while also allowing the pervious definitions to impact the discussion. In each definition, there is a theme of awareness, knowledge, and actionable practice. The goal of racial and cultural competence in this writing seeks to advocate that all educators actively engage in the continuous developmental process gaining skills, values, and instructional strategies to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than one’s own. Having the opportunity to explore the meaning and gain an appreciation for one's cultural differences can help with leveraging new-found relationships. Racial and cultural competence is an ideal toward which to strive. It is not obtained with single professional development, taking a course, or reading a book.
Instead, it is understood that cultural competence is a developmental process that requires the continual acquisition of knowledge, development of new and more advanced skills, and ongoing self-evaluation of progress (Diller & Moule, 2005).

According to a 2014 report published by the Baltimore Education Research Consortium, educators play a critical role in promoting a positive school climate. In the report, the researchers identify that one example of promoting positive school climate includes treating all students equally regardless of ethnicity, gender, and disability. When educators embody such beliefs and understanding, they are allowing students to feel a sense of belonging in the school environment. A school building must actively engage in improving the culture and climate for educators and students. To ensure a school has a positive climate and culture, all educators, administration, and staff within the school building would need to be able to assess culture and name the differences, have the capacity for cultural self-assessment, and recognize that everyone has a culture (Gruenert, 2008). Gruenert explains that after the assessment, a school must create an environment where there is value for diversity, a consciousness of the dynamics involved when cultures interact, and can find ways to bridge differences. With a school environment that possess a positive culture and climate, there is an understanding of institutionalized culture knowledge that changes to meet the needs of those serviced. Gwendolyn Kelley (2010) asserts when educators are fully embracing the process of cultural competency, the atmosphere within the school will have a positive impact on the lives of its students. As an educator, I thrive when the school’s culture and climate is dedicated to changing the lives of students. Such change begins with student-centered educational policies. Studies of ethnic prejudice and discrimination in children have influenced public policy
on interracial relations, for example, Brown v. Board of Education (Benjamin & Course, 2002). This landmark case influenced the necessary educational policy that changed the lives of minority students.

As educational policy and local education agencies take risks with continuously shifting the focus of education for students, I raise the concern that racial and cultural competence must be considered. Studies have found assessment measures that indicate the academic achievement for students of color within public schools in the United States has increasingly shown a gap in comparison to their white counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). There is a need for school districts to begin to consider the factors impacting why students of color are not improving. Accountability must ensure that if the belief of implicit racial biases, the unconscious attitudes, and stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions goes unacknowledged, other racial equity reforms have little chance of working (Vail, 2018). In today’s climate, with the prevalence of occurrences involving implicit bias at the core of concern, it is easy for one to question whether the same could be true for concerns within education. With critical analysis to the field of education, changes have occurred given the development of theory into practice.

**Theoretical Contexts**

The analysis and reflection on the education field must be considered from a lens that requires an intense interpretation that yields a new trajectory to student academic success. To allow for such analysis, I have chosen to allow the foundations of critical theory to support my views and decipher the research conducted. Employing a critical
stance will allow for examining the strengths and, more importantly, the weakness of this exploration.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Theory was developed by a group of writers identified as the Frankfurt School, which was affiliated with the Social Research Institute at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, and it drew on an early Neo-Marxists idea (Grant and Ladson-Billings, 1995). Critical Theory views itself as part of social reality. It includes a configurative aspect that tries to understand social actors and realities concurrently produced and shaped by historical powers and processes (Peters, Lankshear and Olseen, 2003). Scholars who advocated for the theory agreed for one to understand the world around themselves in order to change it. The change challenges historical knowledge by considering who is being silenced and who has power. Critical theory has both an epistemological and political goal with the aim to ensure freedom (Griffiths, 2013).

Influenced by the scholarly work of Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical and interpretive mode that provides a lens to examine race and racism across the dominant cultural patterns of expression. Originating in Western thought, the theory viewed knowledge as neutral and rational. This lens was studied by researchers Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, both of whom were deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Researchers believe that with CRT scholars had the ability of storytelling that brought more voice to racial injustice. Given this understanding, Ladson-Billings was able to distinguish a connection between CRT and areas of education such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation. Critical race
theorists argue for placing race at the center of educational research, thereby "making race visible" (McNair 2008c, 200). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that there needs to be a critical race theoretical perspective in education similar to that of the critical race theory in legal scholarship. This foundation, according to Abrams and Moio (2009), has six basic tenets for which CRT theorists and practitioners share common ground: (1) endemic racism, (2) race as a social construction, (3) differential racialization, (4) Interest convergence/materialist determinism, (5) voices of color, and (6) antiessentialism/intersectionality. These tenets will be discussed in more detail within the literature review of this writing. For this work, CRT will highlight the importance of considering perspectives that are on the outside of the dominant culture. It is essential to indicate that this theory does not suggest that all non-colored people are conscious and deliberately oppressive to people of color. The theory provides discussion for using social activism to transform race, racism, and power in the world. Dixson (2017) reiterates ideas from a historical perspective that African Americans fight for equality began in a hush harbor during slavery with enslaved African learning to read and write (as first cited by Anderson, 1988). However, in today’s context, the struggle for equity is waged in city centers, not only to learn to read and write but also for the very right to attend a high-quality and well-resourced school with expert teachers (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers 2015). Such schools should be available for all students despite geographical region, socioeconomic status, or racial and ethnic background. I will expand on CRT, and its uses for this writing in the literature review.
### Culturally Relevant Teaching

CRT suggests that current instructional strategies presume African American students to be deficient and therefore leave teachers consistently searching for the right strategy or technique. For educators to meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, they must be equipped and supported to implement culturally relevant teaching. Culturally Relevant Teaching is an engagement strategy designed to motivate racially and culturally diverse students (Hammond, 2015). Hammond describes this to be an educators’ ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning-making. Educators then respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the students know to new concepts and content to promote effective processing. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is an expansion from the instructional moves mentioned by Hammond. Gloria Ladson Billings (1995) defines CRP as a pedagogy of opposition that is committed to collective empowerment. She describes that the pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. By taking this approach, educators begin to focus on impacting the cognitive scaffolding that students bring into their classrooms. CRP, Ladson-Billing claims, will support the educator being able to connect to the students' everyday experiences and integrate classroom learning with out-of-school experiences and knowledge. This increased connection between home and school culture will allow families and the broader community to become transparent in students' education. The literature on the subject of cultural competence has explicitly
focused on the idea that African American students, in particular, are educated by teachers who cannot recognize and give attention to the ways that race and racism construct and constrict students' lives (Foster 1990). Ladson-Billings (2010) argues that African American students are told they cannot perform at high levels and are taught by teachers who would rather not educate them.

The curriculum is seen to be a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It silences multiple voices and perspectives, leaving the white upper-class male voices as dominant for student knowledge. This knowledge is restricted to knowing only basics. It speaks to the fact of how voices are silenced to show culture events occurring in a specific manner instead of exposing the reality to what happened and is prevalent. For me, the story of Rosa Parks is an example of a learned curriculum. Traditional textbooks have told of Rosa Parks as an African American who, tired after a day's work, decided that she would disobey the law of sitting in the White only section of the bus. It is argued that there are little to no details that provide students with the background of Parks' as an ongoing activist with the Civil Rights Movement, nor the fact that she had not been the first African American who rejected this enforced law on public transportation during the same period of time. This example illustrates the repetition of omissions, stereotypes, and distortions amongst curriculum. Scholars have argued, "no matter how people of color define themselves, there are still the more dominant stereotypes embedded in the public culture that define their status and identities (Tillman, 2002). This remark has some relevance for other cultures of people and advocates that identity is a priority within the teaching practice of culturally competent educators. Cultural competence and CRT are intertwined to impact
the learning of students by enhancing the instructional practices of the classroom educator. With this in mind, the educator must engage in a sense-making process to conceptualize how one’s identity is revealed.

**Situated-Mediated Identity**

Situated-Mediated Identity involves culturally relevant teaching strategy and pedagogy with processes of racial and cultural development (Murrell, 2007). When looking at human development, Murrell explains how by solely relying on the traditional body of work on identity, there becomes an issue the work is grounded in cultural norms of White, middle-class, and affluent families and societies. This work excludes children who experience a more racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse social world. The norms for dominant culture are not equivalent to the norms for people of color. Also, Murrell focuses on a different lens of situated identity that allows identity to be understood through a developmental process of achieving agency, proficiency, and positionality related to the many reference groups and activity settings experienced through life. Within this process, individuals move through three phases: situated identity awareness, awareness of one's positioning and positionality, and finally agency. The first phase is the realization that one is a different person in different contexts. The second phase is the realization of how one can actively position oneself in his or her interactions with others to present the desired persona to others. The third phase is agency as a critical conscious understanding of both one's situation and positionality in any given setting or context. Murrell provides a working explanation of the vital processes of identity and agency development in the school setting.

In addition, this writing will employ
components of reflectivity as way to build on Murrell’s definition to allow myself as the research to become involved.

Situated-Mediated Identity helps to describe an individual assuming different personas within a variety of social contexts. The theory draws and builds on theoretical ideas from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and critical theory. I've used this work to reflect on my own situated identity in hopes of understanding how this may relate to the circumstances for students of color. I am Ms. McMillion to my students and co-workers. This identity is different than the Laquita that my family knows and understands. Even more complicated is the identification of "Quida," the friend to individuals I've known since childhood. Even more unique is Laquita the woman, a female known by her sexual partners. My understanding of identity as fluid gives me the ability to explore and make sense of Laquita McMillion, the educator seeking to maintain racial and cultural competence within the field of education. Thus, my identity is mediated through the environment that I am within. My familiar experiences with situating identity can be similar to students who enter into the classroom of educators around the world at the beginning of the school year. One must question in the first week of school if students are exhibiting the identity they want to assume for a new teacher or are the actions and behaviors exhibited to maintain the status quo amongst their peers? The tension between the individual representation of self and the ascriptions made of the individual by broader society is a struggle for students. This struggle can be supported by an educators' ability to explore learning their students on a deeper level.
Roadmap

The United States is often considered to be the land of the free, filled with opportunities that will advance one’s quality of life. With this societal view of the country, many individuals emigrate to the U.S. from other countries daily. According to Sonia Nieto (2016), immigration remains one of today's most contentious issues. She stresses that immigration offers a particularly vivid example of the sociopolitical context, despite its mythological influence on U.S. identity and social ideologies. In the following chapter, I will elaborate in the literature review about the historical context of culture within the field of public-school education, expanding on critical theory as a framework and providing the evolution of racial and cultural competence for educators. My concern is the vast amount of theoretical presence with the topic of cultural competence and insignificant reference of educator voices expressing their understanding and prevalence of the topic in practice. When referencing the field of education, the discussion is focused on aspects of pedagogy, curriculum, and instructional practices to promote racial and cultural competence.

I believe there is an insufficient focus in education field on how one engages in the process of racial and cultural competence presented as a reflective process. It is my belief when one does not engage in the developmental process of reflecting within their system of beliefs, traditions, and assumptions, conflict will ensue when engaging in pedagogy and instructional practices. I want to share my experience and those of educators who are teaching students of color in public schools. This research seeks share the lived experiences of educators on their journey working with a diverse student population, while also considering their own culture.
Although, other experts and professionals can assist in advancing one in the process, external support alone cannot sustain the process. Being culturally competent means having the capacity to function effectively in a variety of cultural contexts and settings, unlike those of one's primary socialization (Murrell, 2007). This work seeks to advocate for the development of coursework and professional development that will enhance an educator’s racial and cultural competence through hard work, guided practice, and critical self-reflection beginning at the undergraduate level. It is my personal belief that some educators lack awareness of their positionality in the cycle of teaching and learning. As a result, this lack of awareness can stand in their way to effectively implement culturally relevant pedagogy and practices. This is a belief that I sought to explore to understand its truth. The vision of this work is grounded in a conceptual framework that is positioned to encourage theory development that is useful to practice, explains observations, and provides a context for interpreting the findings of racial and cultural competence.

As I begin to envision successful implementation and training with educators and pre-service candidates on the topic of racial and cultural competence, I become ecstatic. While remaining hopeful that it would be received well, I’ve begun a transition into how I can influence such change from my current position as a classroom educator. I’ve decided that in this current state of advocating for a change, I must seek forgiveness instead of permission to communicate my thoughts and beliefs as it relates to the need for racial and cultural competence within public education. To do this, I must transform into a tempered radical- an informal leader who quietly challenges prevailing wisdom and provokes cultural transformation (Meyerson, 2001). Tempered radicals use the tactics of disruptive
self-expression, verbal jujitsu, variable-term opportunism, and strategic alliance building. Meyerson considers these tactics as falling on a spectrum, beginning with those the most personal by the single individual to those most public working with others. I want to explore creating change within the field of education. This journey will require me to assume the identity as a leader of change in collaboration with my colleagues. I’m aware there may be some individuals that may not agree with me and others who might have never considered their positionality related to racial and cultural competence. Yet, this will require me to engage them in practices that advances their knowledge and inspire them to continue to learn and grow. Christina Bielaska-DuVernay (2008) states that leaders need to strike the right balance to not only create change but to sustain the environment of trust during the transition.

According to Bielaska-DuVernay, this change must be balanced in six areas (1) catalyze change/cope with the transition (2) show a sense of urgency/demonstrate realistic patience (3) be tough/ be empathetic (4) show optimism/be realistic and open (5) be self-reliant/trust others (6) capitalize on strengths/go against the grain. By utilizing these strategies, I'm convinced that educators will begin to make a change within the field to ensure the ongoing process of cultural competence is of priority for their colleagues, prospective educators, and themselves.

Racial and Cultural Competence plays a pivotal role in improving school success. I believe that the discussion concerning this developmental process is lacking amongst public-school educators, administrators, and staff within urban areas. I'm confident that with practitioners like myself, there is a pathway for change. As I continue the work of my dissertation, I’m reminded daily of a quote that was produced from a student
campaign conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center on the topic of the Trump Effect and the impact of the 2016 presidential election on our nation’s schools. The quote stated, “think about the power you’ve been given. Then ask yourself, is what I’m doing right?”. For me, this quote represented a piece of advice any new leader must consistently engage with to ensure they are holding some level of accountability for themselves. It also begins to explain the mental capacity for which I must analyze and share the need for racial and cultural competence in schools today.

In this chapter, I presented a vignette that helped to establish the purpose that propelled my curiosity to engage in this research. The audience of this dissertation is not intended for academics. The target audience of this research are teachers, parents, and community members. Interweaving stories within this research makes it more accessible for the audience. Through the use of a narrative inquiry and a critical lens, this study will explore the perception and experiences of public-school educators as it relates to racial and cultural competence in the context of their classroom practice. In the following chapter a review of literature will be presented. This review will encompass my voice in a conversation alongside literature to allow and provoke new knowledge.
Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.
-Maya Angelou

Introduction

A twenty-four-year-old female finds it unfathomable to listen as her grandmother recounts her childhood as if it were yesterday, instead of more than eight decades prior. Tears fill her eyes as she reminisced the moments in her life when public schools were segregated. A time in history when many African Americans could not conceptualize a future where Barack Obama would serve two presidential terms, as the first African American President of the United States. The grandmother recounts the moments of her childhood living in the southern region of the United States, “surviving” as an African American woman. After having children, she decided to migrate to the North. Her words were lingering with nostalgia for happiness while messaging the importance of education and valuing yourself as a young African American woman. Each statement she made resonating with the granddaughter, who listened attentively. Born on January 18, 1922, thirty-two years before the historic ruling in the Brown vs. Board of Education, the grandmother details her life as a child to her adult granddaughter in hopes that the conversation would support a research paper for the granddaughters’ graduate program. The lasting impact of this one conversation would lead the granddaughter on a journey to explore her culture and the ways for which it has positioned her life as an adult.

Sonia Sotomayor once stated, “it is important for all of us to appreciate where we come from and how that history has shaped us in ways that we might not understand.” History holds the story of cultural ideas, customs, and social behaviors for your family. In
the opening memoir, I, Laquita McMillion, am the granddaughter of the now-deceased grandmother Annie McMillion. Sharing such a significant moment in my life will allow you as the reader to adventure alongside me as I interpret that moment with my grandmother. It was moments such as the one in the opening, that impacted my ability to construct meaning for my passion within education as it relates to my professional and personal identity.

According to researchers Smythe and Spence (2012), the purpose of the literature review is to provoke thinking among the writers and the readers. It is imperative to acknowledge that throughout this literature review, I employ a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach that invites the writer to share her voice in a conversation with the literature to allow and provoke new thinking and understanding. The hermeneutic-phenomenological review draws from the hermeneutic philosophy as a theoretical perspective for exploring and interpreting the meaning of the text and as a method text (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010, 2014, as cited in Efron & Ravid, 2019, p. 22). Employing a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach for writing this chapter allows me to bring the voices of my grandmothers and myself in a dialogue with the literature to explore and interpret the meaning of the text. I acknowledge that my personal experiences and social and cultural background are involved in the interpretation of the meaning of scholarly writings relevant to my research.

Through this process, my interpretations of the sources will not hold to a chronological timeline as it relates to my family history and personal experiences. Neville and Cross (2017) emphasize the point in psychology literature, as one’s mindset is radically altered during the process of encountering an epiphany (as cited by Robbins &
Bishop, 2008). Schwartz (2010) explained that epiphanies offer intense moments of insight that make possible the juxtaposition of facts, factors, or theories in arrangements previously thought impossible—that is, beyond what was previously imagined. The epiphany of the introductory conversation acknowledges the realities from which I began to analyze the literature about the connectedness of multicultural education in America and my educational journey within it.

Thus, the mentioning of past events and flexibility with time shifts will provide the opportunity for readers to connect to the content presented in this literature review easily. This connectedness seeks to broaden the audience of this research outside the sphere of academics and into the hands of educators, parents and community members of the field of education. I was very fortunate to have had in-depth conversations with my grandmother in the years before her death. I will draw on these conversations to highlight the themes in this writing. Through the interpretation and synthesizing of the literature review, I engage in the process of sense-making. Sense-making refers to any attempt or process to determine the meaning systems in which one is operating (Murrell, 2007). I recognize my subjectivity and reflexive stance as I analyze the scholarly writings through my cultural perspective and values.

Within this literature review, I begin with the historical perspective of multicultural education as it relates to the historical lives of my grandmothers, followed by the presentation of relevant literature focused on historical policy development with connections related to teacher training programs. Subsequently, I focus on the theoretical perspectives as they will provide a lens for analysis and interpretation throughout this scholarly writing. Finally, this chapter brings attention to transitioning theory into school
practice. The structure of this literature review allowed for the synthesizing of theoretical, philosophical, and qualitative studies.

**Historical Perspective**

While no definition for the term multicultural education can truly capture the entirety and complexities involved, for this writing, I use the definition provided by the Sonia Nieto (2000). According to Nieto, *Multicultural Education* is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students that challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in school and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Nieto further characterizes the term of multiculturalism by seven essential components: (1) Multicultural education is *antiracist education*. (2) Multicultural education is *basic education*. (3) Multicultural education is *important for all students*. (4) Multicultural education is *pervasive*. (5) Multicultural education is an *education for social justice*. (6) Multicultural education is a *process*. (7) Multicultural education is a *critical pedagogy*.

I agree with Nieto’s definition and believe it encompasses comprehensible knowledge of multicultural education for which I stand in agreeance of what should be considered as a foundation to multicultural education. For educators and policymakers, the bases of discussion as it relates to multicultural education must focus on the individuals whom all policies will ultimately impact: children. There must be a consideration for the overall student population, without restriction to their geographical location or socioeconomic status rather than focusing on an aggregated sample of the student population in the United States. Focusing a small sample of the student population hinders educational policy to impact all students. Educational policy helps to
define who has the opportunity to receive an education provided through formal schooling. To give historical preface for this writing, the time period that requires mentioning when considering the distinct differences in educational policy providing inequitable considerations for all humans, began during the enslavement of African Americans.

Slavery in the United States disregarded African Americans as humans to be given rights by the laws of the country, one of which denied them access to education. Within the framework of slavery, it is crucial to understand that the greater society did not consider Black people to be fully human (Baptiste & Sanchez 2003). If one is not to be considered fully human, what needs or rights should they be entitled to? Even the idea that a human could not be fully human is absurd. African Americans were considered property, and their slave owners ensured this mindset reflected how they were treated, despite the articulations of the founding documents of the United States. The role and responsibility of the President of the United States are to implement and enforce the laws written by Congress. These responsibilities impact changes related to the fair treatment of all humans, yet even with founding documents such as the Constitution, that assurance was not provided to African Americans. President James Madison is mentioned in government publications as a “Father of the Constitution” (Freidel & Sidey, 2006). As the fourth serving President of the United States, he helped to ratify the Constitution. The Constitution is the framework of the country provided to govern the entire human population. Wills (2002) eloquently stated that while President James Madison helped in writing the constitution, he was not remarkable as a protector of the rights of Blacks, Native Americans, or slaves.
In stark contrast, one of his successors President Rutherford B. Hayes used his values of education to advocate for the education of women, Black citizens, and the poor. Researchers Baptiste and Sanchez (2003) have long explored the impacts of American Presidents and their attitudes, beliefs, and actions surrounding education. Their writing highlights details of President Hayes, who made many proposals, wrote many bills, and tried to convince the media and the public that federal aid to education would be a valuable contribution to America, especially to the Blacks of the South (as cited by Hoogenboom, 1995). Looking back on both of these presidential terms helps to provide a perspective on the different actions taken by presidential leaders as it relates to the historical context of inequality for multicultural education. While I had no living members of my family who lived during the presidencies of Madison or Hayes, I cannot help but feel compelled by the injustice’s slavery placed upon my ancestors. Such injustices that are have continued to impact the lives of my family and myself in the present day.

For me, even more emotionally affecting were the presidential years for which both of my grandmothers’ (Annie McMillion and Roberta Douglas) lived and spoke of in hopes of conveying the importance to remain resilient through consistent oppression. Each woman disclosed her lived experiences through political policies that impacted their families and ultimately impacted on my views about the field of education. More notable for each woman were the years during the historic Civil Rights Movement. It was during this historical time that, given segregation within public schools, the lack of consideration for equality within schools for African American students was evident. The most memorable moment for Annie was the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, that stated
segregation was a violation of the 14th amendment to the Constitution. During this year, Annie was thirty-two years old, living in the state of Mississippi with children whom the law had a direct impact. While the highest court in the nation gave the ruling, advocacy to ensure this law was fully implemented in many U.S. states. For example, in September 1958, schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, were closed by Governor Faubus to prevent more black children from attending white schools (FindLaw, n.d.). FindLaw is an online legal marketing resource owned by Thomson Reuters, supporting consumers and small businesses. Legal writers and editors at the organization of FindLaw note that the schools remained closed until August of 1959 when the U.S. Supreme Court ordered them reopened. Equality within the field of education for African American children remained an issue as the years persisted.

My grandmother Roberta Douglass (known hereafter as Bigma) was a teenage girl when Ruby Bridges became the first African American to desegregate schools in 1960. Bigma characterized that year as the onset of her sincere hope in her family having endless opportunities given the bravery of Ruby. She vividly described growing up as a young girl picking cotton for a living. Taken to the doctor by her mother to receive the official messaging that cotton picking in the heat could lead to her death, she was reassigned the responsibility of nurturing the children as the elders in the family worked to support the family financially. Soon after, her mother passed away from cancer, forcing Bigma to interrupt her sixth-grade year in school to become a full-time caretaker for her younger brother and sisters. At the same time, her father worked to support the children financially. Years later, hearing the radio recount the events surrounding Ruby Bridges desegregating an elementary school provided a new reality for the possibilities
awaiting her siblings. Bigma recalled the news reporting decisions made by President Eisenhower to protect the safety of Ruby Bridges by providing marshals outside of the school. She believed this was an empathic response that demonstrated his belief in protecting African Americans.

Both of my grandmothers recall presidents, who discussed equality in education. Researchers and scholars of education highlight a striking moment in education years after desegregation when President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty focused its attention on the nation’s most vulnerable group of students in schools (Darling-Hammond 2007, Howard 2010). It was during his State of the Union address in 1964 that President Lyndon B. Johnson sought to claim victory for one-fifth of the people who had not shared in the abundance of opportunity. Howard summarized the words of Darling-Hammond eloquently in the following quote:

Darling-Hammond (2007) explains how, during the 1960s and into the 1970s, the Great Society’s War on Poverty program made noteworthy financial investments in underfunded rural and urban schools, and the result was significant gains in educational input and output. Unfortunately, as investments and resources for urban and rural education were substantially reduced in the 1980s, the gaps in student outcomes began to increase again.

The gap in student outcomes, as mentioned by Darling-Hammond, are most referenced by the phrase “achievement gap”. The achievement gap usually refers to the disparity in academic outcomes between African American, Native American, and Latino students, and their White and certain Asian American peers. The gap is reflected most clearly in
the elementary grade level, standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, placement in special education and advanced placement courses, and suspension and expulsion rates (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). While there was evidence of change within the field of education, from this historical period, the desegregation of schools has had an impact on the diversity and lack thereof. Some scholars assert that perhaps the single most important act that can be done to reverse disparities of educational opportunities and outcomes is to ensure that all students have highly qualified teachers in their classrooms, particularly in those schools where underachievement has remained prevalent (Irvine, 2003; Marzano, 2003; Nieto, 2003). On the other hand, some scholars suggest that as a result of the racial separation that has influenced schools’ conditions for students over the past several centuries, race is not the most distinguishing factor in educational opportunity; that socioeconomic status is most germane to understanding the problem (Wilson, 2009).

Mandated by the Constitution, the census has the role of counting our population and households to make a basis of reapportioning congressional seats, redistricting, and distributing more than $675 billion in federal funds annually to support states, counties and community programs- impacting housing, education, transportation, employment, and health care and public policy (United States Census Bureau, 2019). As of July 1, 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau indicated the United States as the third most populous country behind China and India. Within this large population of individuals in our country, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported:

- during the time period of 2015-2016 about 80 percent of public-school teachers were White, 9 percent were Hispanic, 7 percent were Black, 2 percent were
Asian, and 1 percent were Two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In a comparison to 2015, the percentage of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools who were White decreased from 61 to 49 percent, and Black decreased from 17 to 15 percent. On the other hand, there was an increase in Hispanics (16 to 26 percent) and Asian/Pacific (4 to 5 percent) Islanders.

Given the shifting demographics amongst the teaching workforce and student population intensifies a call to action across the field of education. Researchers Gay and Howard (2000) identify these growing changes as the beginning of the demographic divide. They bring attention to implications for multicultural teacher preparation in the 21st century raising, concerns for fear of teaching students of color and resistance to dealing directly with race and racism in the teacher preparation and classroom practices. There must remain an active process of advocating for educational policy leaders to revolutionize the fundamental knowledge base and skill set necessary to educate our diverse student population across the nation.

**Policy Development Impact on Teacher Training Programs**

In the United States, individual states regulate the teaching profession through teacher certification programs that serve as gateways into the teaching profession (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2007). Each state has different variances to the certification requirements. It is crucial to understand how the process of certification deems teachers effective to educate our countries children in a public-school classroom. Policy mandating a focus on schools, and student achievement brings a focus on teacher certification and effectiveness. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act occurred in 2001
under the George W. Bush administration. This Act provided expectations and assessments as the answer to ensuring effective teaching were measured for accountability purposes. The accountability systems perpetuated a focus on teacher effectiveness with a focus on aspects to ensure veteran teachers and preservice teacher candidates were “highly qualified” upon completion of their certification program.

Given this understanding, it is essential to focus on the development of policy as it relates to teacher training programs. Educational policy dictates the structure and organization of teacher training programs to maintain accreditation amongst institutions. For the discussion on education policy’s impact on teachers, it is significant to understand the pathways by which educators obtain certifications to teach students. This discussion will allow the reader to consider an area of advocacy for educational policy and program reform that includes the topic of racial and cultural competence as a necessity to educating the diverse student population in today’s public-school system.

Although the past 30 years have shown an increase in teachers of color in the workforce (12% to 20%) there is still a significant misrepresentation of diversity in this nation for the field of education. Researcher Desiree Carver-Thomas (2018) reported many teachers of color feel called to teach in low-income communities of color, positions that are often difficult to fill. I, too, feel this sentiment within my job as a public-school classroom educator. I question myself: can I reciprocate my love for education to children in underserved communities? Having a passion for learning helps one to explore the possibilities of the world outside of their community. Caver-Thomas asserts that due to these feelings three out of four teachers of color work in the quartile of schools serving most students of color nationally. Adjustments to educational policy focused on
recruitment and retention can positively impact the numbers of teachers of color within the workforce. Martin et al. (2005) analyzed other countries – including Finland, Canada, and Poland- who have shown significant academic progress based on international assessment results. These researchers highlight that such countries place excellent teaching front and center on ensuring recruitment, selecting, and educating teacher candidates were redesigned. In 2015 the Department of Education passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), with one element to address the issue of needing effective teachers working with minority and low-income students. With a focus on educational reform, the United States has increased emphasis on accountability, teacher preparation standards, and improved student performance as higher importance (Whitford, Zhang, Katsiyannis, 2017). To ensure students in the United States system can compete with other countries, policy reauthorizations such as ESSA allowed the focus on understanding how teacher preparation occurred, bringing the discussion of traditional and alternative certification.

The following discussion for traditional and non-traditional teacher preparation programs will support the understanding of cultural competency. Such programs are the basis from which candidates receive their knowledge and respect toward different communities’ cultures. Next to school safety, improving the quality of teachers is one of the most important issue facing public schools (Urban Teacher Collaborative, 2000). Whitford et al. (2017) reinforce the definition of traditional teacher preparation programs as typically serving undergraduate students who have no prior teaching or work experience. Generally, traditional teacher preparation programs lead to candidates obtaining a bachelor’s degree. On the other hand, some programs lead to a teaching credential without a degree. Given the differences amongst both programs, candidates
experience variance of course work and field experiences that may or may not include theoretical literature focused on the topics of race and culture. It is recommended that during the training and preparation of prospective educators is one entry way to advocate for beginning the process of becoming culturally competent for the field.

A traditional certification entryway, required course content falls into three broad areas: foundational courses, pedagogical courses, and content or subject-matter knowledge (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2007). It is through a traditional certification pathway, I argue, that perspective educators gain a depth of knowledge and extensive field experience. I had the pleasure of entering the profession through a traditional certification program. Following a childhood passion for becoming an educator, I began college at the age of 18 years old attending Chicago State University in the fall of 2008. This decision came after contemplating a career in accounting, in which I was astounded by the online studies publishing the starting salary of individuals with this specific degree. Despite the financial benefits, I selected education as the majoring field of choice.

During the initial stages of my post-secondary career, I attended general courses with students in a variety of majors. However, towards the third year within the program, I began to take courses strictly related to my field of study with peers who only majored in the field of education. It was during the latter coursework that I engaged with like-minded individuals who wholeheartedly believed that teachers could change the world one student, classroom, and school year at a time. It was this group of peers in which I could engage in discussions for hours concerning the philosophies that an administrative team and staff of teachers should embody to produce productive citizens that will
ultimately change the world. In the course of these discussions, we would come to realize, with the guidance from our professors, that the ideals in which we aspire to enhance within the field of education may not be pragmatic for the rapidly changing field. Then, I couldn’t quite comprehend the position from which professors were speaking. I questioned the theories presented by my professors, and remain intrigued about the lived experiences they shared which would soon be my reality. The experience for many traditional certification candidates comes once they begin to have the opportunity to practice.

Another point of discussion with traditional certification focuses on the life-limited experiences that young educators, such as myself, who go directly into college and then into their teaching career after graduating in comparison to the latter. Controversially, one may question the wisdom of traditionally certified teachers making the point that with few lived experiences, connectedness to content and family rationales may occur. With this in mind and the ability to allow the field of education to adjust the opportunity gap of allowing more candidates into the workforce, many states have implemented alternative certification programs.

Alternative routes to certification typically allow teachers to enter the classroom by postponing or bypassing many of the criteria required by traditional teacher preparation programs (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2007). In 1983, there were only four states that offered alternative certification programs. Yet, by 2003, 46 states provided alternative certification programs allowing a larger pool of individuals with desires to enter the classroom the opportunity to support teacher shortages.
(Birkeland & Paske, 2004). In years since, this path into teaching has seen a rise in its popularity.

Alternative certification programs, as defined by researcher Julie Rowland Woods (2016), provide a quicker route into the teaching profession than traditional programs while still providing more preparation than might be required for an emergency credential. Throughout the United States, more federal agencies are partnering with their local districts to understand how they must reestablish the teaching profession as an attractive and valued career field. There have been many programs that train teachers to become educators, including the Academy of Urban Leadership (AUSL), Teach for America (TFA), Boston Teacher Residency (BTR), Texas Teachers, and New York Teaching Fellowship.

Such programs allow candidates to complete a series of coursework and training hours to gain some experience in teaching. Rowland Woods (2016) asserts that by using the strategy of alternative certification programs helps to increase the number of teachers in a state as well as enhance their diversity and skillsets. The researcher further expands on the ideas first presented by Lorraine Evans’s (2011) research, indicating that alternative programs also attract more minority and male recruits, and these recruits may be more likely to choose to work in urban or high-needs schools. I ponder if the experienced years through other careers drastically support candidates who consider alternative certification. To this point Rowland Woods suggests that teachers with an education or professional background relevant to the subjects they teach can bring new ideas and relevance to students’ classwork and may even have more subject area content knowledge than traditionally certified teachers.
I’ve had the unique experience of participating in a graduate program, which offered the ability for certified teachers to gain a master’s degree through a residency model. The program also provided non-certified candidates the ability to become alternatively certified in addition to obtaining a Master’s in Education. My residency class consisted of 150 individuals from all across the United States. There were five cohorts: 2 with educators who were already certified to teach through a traditional program, 2 with teaching candidates who would receive alternative certification, and 1 in which was mixed with traditional and alternative certification candidates. They wanted to specialize in teaching diverse learners. These diverse groups of people were essentially all striving to become effective, highly qualified urban teachers.

The unique conversations that occurred between alternative certification teachers were always centered on classroom structures that were needed for survival in the educational field. It wasn’t until the middle of the school year when alternative certified candidates began to make comparisons of the public-school system and the residency program. The residents’ perspectives were based on their previous professional experiences and their expectations of how the school should go. It was always intriguing to hear advocates of students speak to the rigid structure of the residency and attempting to make sense of the multiple stakeholders that were separated from the public-school district officials. Although the residency allowed certification to happen quicker than a traditional teacher prep program, with an additional degree status attained, the experience of observations and evaluation card sheets involved critical reflection for residents when considering theory into action. Overall, allowing alternative certification candidates to study alongside traditionally certified educators brought collective knowledge that
leveraged the expertise of all individuals within the residency (Ng, 2003). This model is successful and allows more educators to gather around the goal of student success begins to answer the initial call to how to increase the number of educators. However, a more comprehensive approach to education is necessary to ensure the recruitment and retainment of teachers of color (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019).

Carver-Thomas (2018) believes that there is evidence of success from programs and initiatives across the country which illustrate the intentional and sustained approach to recruiting and retaining teachers of color. The author asserts that the characteristics of such evidence are revealed through three key elements: building high retention and supportive pathways into teaching, create proactive hiring and induction strategies, and improve school teaching conditions through improved school leadership. When building high-retention and supportive pathways into teaching, such program models allow for field experiences before or within a supervised teaching setting. Thus, the teaching experiences must not come at the financial burden of teacher candidates as my experience with a traditional teacher preparation program. As a suggestive for states and local policymakers to encourage more students of color to pursue a teaching career policy must consider the cost of teacher preparation through service scholarship and loan forgiveness programs that will cover or reimburse a portion of tuition costs in exchange for a commitment in high-need schools or subject areas, typically for 3 to 5 years (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019).

In my experience, some candidates initially attempt completion of a program which offers financial assistance with the intent of receiving financial assistance or forgiveness for the determined commitment. After that, when their term of the obligation
is completed, most candidates are no longer vested in the work for which they were committed. Alternative residency programs such as TFA and AUSL have reported these concerns based on the tracking of the alumni data. Another element of financial support can focus on states providing funding for teacher residences, which are partnerships between districts and universities. The residencies will subsidize and improve teachers’ training to teach in high need schools and high-demand subject areas. Participants spend a year working as apprentices with highlight effective mentor teachers while completing related coursework at the partnering universities. They commit to teaching and an additional 3 to 4 years in their district with ongoing mentoring support.

On the other hand, districts can develop their programs that recruit teacher candidates from nontraditional populations who are more likely to reflect local diversity and more likely to continue to teach in their communities. To support candidates of color, funding must include intensive teacher preparation support programs that offer ongoing mentorship, tutoring, exam stipends, job placement services, and other supports that ensure their successful completion of preparation programs. States can design data systems that monitor the racial diversity of enrollees in teacher preparation programs, as well as those who complete the program to support recruiting and supporting teacher candidates of color in high-quality programs (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

Once educator candidates are hired, districts must create proactive hiring and induction strategies. With a comprehensive plan, districts can begin with shifting hiring timelines earlier. The plan allows administrators the ability to effectively enable candidates ample time to make life-changing decisions when being offered positions. In connection with timely decision-making, districts can provide incentives for veteran
teachers to announce resignation, retirement, and transfer intentions in early spring so that it is possible to recruit new hires earlier in the season. This practice was implemented through negotiations with Chicago Public Schools and their Teachers union (CTU, 2015).

Meanwhile, districts can partner with local teacher preparation programs to coordinate student teaching placements that will allow administrators the ability to evaluate candidates for hire before they graduate, allowing the ability to assess effectiveness for the school population matched with the candidate’s specialties. By ensuring they allow focus on working with Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific-Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), as well as traditional programs to maximize social capital. Districts can include teachers of color in the hiring process in meaningful and collaborative ways, such as by creating diverse hiring committees in which teachers of color can shape recruitment and hiring strategies. The results will send positive signals to recruits and can ensure greater fairness in the hiring process.

A final component to support recruitment and retaining educators of color lays in the improvement of school teaching conditions through improved school leadership. Christina Bielaska-DuVernay states that leaders need to strike the right balance to not only create change but to sustain the environment of trust during change (Bielaszka-DuVernay, 2008). This change, states Bielaszka-DuVernay, must be balanced in six areas (1) catalyze change/cope with transition (2) show a sense of urgency/demonstrate realistic patience (3) be tough/be empathetic (4) show optimism/be realistic and open (5)
be self-reliant/trust others (6) capitalize on strengths/go against the grain. The focus on this leadership typically is placed on the shoulder of the school principal. For this reason, principal preparation is essential to obtaining the knowledge base and skills required to support teacher teachers of color. States can support improved principal training by strengthening program accreditation and licensure standards to ensure that principals have clinical experiences in schools with diverse students and staff and learn to create collaborative, supportive work environments for the teachers (Bottoms et al., 2003). Bottoms et al. suggest, setting-aside funds to strengthen the quality of school leaders by investing in principal recruitment, preparation, induction, and development focused on supportive school leadership. With investments in evidence-based school improvement strategies to enhance instructional quality and supports for students will result in reducing the displacement of teachers of color, who most often teach in struggling schools. According to Bottoms et al., these strategies can include schoolwide professional development and community schools, which focus on whole child development through community partnerships. Just as important is the establishment of a connection of teachers with the community, and forming partnerships with local universities to actively recruit teachers of color into administrator preparation programs. Committing to the improvements at the state level for teachers and school leaders will, Bielaszka-DuVernay asserts, drastically allow the initiation of diversifying the teacher workforce. Once teachers of color are in the field, as some are today, how will schools ensure the differences amongst such a diverse workforce remain equitable and inclusive?
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study draws from the Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Each theory is complicated and aligns with the fields of education to create a unique analytical lens to further the understanding of racial and cultural competence for educators. Critical theorists understand that persistent educational failure of children of color is not a function of their “culture”, but instead of systemic oppression designed to protect white privilege and educational privilege. The goal of Critical Theory is to liberate individuals from the negative effects of these inequalities with the goal to enact positive change (Morrison, 2009). In his research, Morrison (2009) noted the liberation sought by Critical Theory is the ability to analyze knowledge for its’ Truth. Critical Theory emphasizes Truth as being subjective and contextual as opposed to being generalizable and objective. Based on the literature, I argue that a Critical Theory lens helps the field of education reveal the ideologies grounded in policies, standards, and funding. From my position as an urban school educator, I have experienced first-hand the concept of privilege in the simplistic forms of schooling voiced through my colleagues and students. For example, my colleagues questioning the local school board about misappropriating funds amongst schools resulting in buildings with higher populations of students of color receiving less than their White counterparts. When students attend school district full events and question the quality of their provided transportation in comparison to the chartered buses that many White students exit, such questions raise a response grounded in the critical theory with a focus on race. This scholarly writing seeks to explore the experiences of public-school
educators using the theoretical framework introduced from Critical Theory: Critical Race Theory.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) studies race and racism while opposing to the traditional paradigms, methods, and texts, to show how different discourses on race, gender, social class, and these social structures intersect and how they impact people of color (ACAR ÇİFTÇİ & GÜROL, 2015). CRT seeks to tell the stories of people of color by honoring their experiences of life. Critical racial theories exert a significant influence on the humanities and social science scholarship, especially critical ethnicity studies (e.g., Gaspar de Alba, 2003; Noriega, 2000; Saldivar, 1990). Dixson (2017) highlights the use of CRT in education being is documented and recognized amongst the field (Crenshaw, 2011; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). However, the theory was developed in response to the lack of diversity among Harvard University academics and the marginalization of students of color at the Harvard Law School. While birthed in the legal field, CRT has been used by scholars in the field of education to help transform the structural and cultural aspects that play in maintaining the status of dominant and oppressed groups. Within this scholarly writing, I draw on four of the six basic tenets of CRT based on the literature presented by Abrams and Moio (2009). These tenets include 1) racial as a social construction, 2) interest convergence, 3) voice of color, and 4) intersectionality.

CRT maintains that it is a contrived system of categorizing people according to observable physical attributes that have no correspondence to genetic or biological reality (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Therefore, the attributes and categorizations for race are created
and imposed on individuals. Abrams and Moio (2009) support the idea that racism brings material and psychic advantage to the majority race, and progressive change regarding race occurs when the interests of the powerful happen to converge with those of the racially oppressed (Bell, 1995 as cited by Abrams & Moio, 2009). The existing literature emphasizes interest convergence as when significant progress for Blacks is achieved only when the goals of Blacks are consistent with the needs of Whites (Bell, 1980, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998). The work of Khalifa et al. (2013) details how neoliberal reforms of high stakes testing though touted as a way to increase achievement for students of color benefit, Whites and businesses more (as cited by Capper, 2015). In the hiring process of one of my teaching positions, it seemed that the hiring of the Black girl met a minority quota to ensure the district complied with federal mandates. This conclusion was drawn based on an impromptu conversation with a colleague. The individual inquired if I enjoyed working for the district and continued to elaborate on how it was her consistent conversations with administration and district leaders to hire an African American. On the other hand, the intentions of my colleague could have been genuine. Her advocacy could have been grounded in ensuring staff diversity to resemble the diverse student body. However, given my knowledge of interest convergence, I contemplated the mere idea of being considered a selection of my racial identification with disregard to expertise for educating urban students. A selection made that in one way may benefit students, but ultimately maintains limited progress of diversity within a diverse school district. In describing this account, I find power in the ability to tell a story of my critical analysis transparently. This type of storytelling is honored and sought after by Critical Race theorist as it relates to the tenet, voices of color.
The tenet “voices of color” is based on the idea that the dominant group’s accounting of history routinely excludes racial and other minority perspectives to justify and legitimize its power (Abrams & Moio, 2009). CRT advocates a rewriting of history to include the lived reality of oppressed groups from their perspectives and in their own words. In this way, the narrative of the majority is not assumed to be facts or the truth. CRT has traditional roots in *counterstories* or accounts based on the experiential knowledge of the racially oppressed (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). The use to employ CRT within this writing allows the ability for participants to reveal the realities through a reflective process. Racism is so ingrained in our nation's social and institutional structures as to be almost invisible, that the experiences of Whites should not be accepted as normative, and that racism affects every aspect of education (Bell, 2002; Feagin, 2006). Storytelling allows for what W. E. B. Du Bois’ accounts as ‘double consciousness’.

Double consciousness is a “complex and constant play between the exclusionary conditions of social structure marked by race and the psychological and cultural strategies employed by the racially excluded and marginalized to accommodate themselves to everyday indignities as well as to resist them” (Essed & Goldberg, 2001). The idea of double consciousness can be used to explain how African Americans are simultaneous “an American; A negro”. This uniqueness is described as having the best of both worlds. In the one world, you understand Whiteness and how it exists in the world while encompassing your identity and culture as a Black person.

CRT intersectionality of various oppressions and suggests that a primary focus on race can eclipse other forms of exclusion (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Within the intersectionality, race is considered with other identities and differences. Through a CRT
lens, educators who serve children of color need to know how to affirm them daily, learn to see these children through asset, not deficit lenses. Individuals subscribing to deficit thinking frequently contend that low-income students and students of color are not “fit” for academic success and social uplift (J. E. King, 1991; Pine & Hilliard, 1990).

Engaging in reflexivity from a critical race perspective can assist scholars in interrogating their racial conceptualizations, and those conceptualizations frame our research as critical scholars (Duncan, 2002).

**Culture & Identity**

Despite the route to certification one has taken to become an educator, whether traditional or alternative certification, in this writing, I believe that understanding one’s culture and identity is essential and should occur before and continuously through professional development to engage with students and staff effectively. Culture essentially means sense-making (Joseph, 2011). It becomes the system in which people organize their perceptions of their environment and their lives. Hannerz (1992) emphasizes culture is “the meaning which people create, and which creates people, as members of societies” (as cited by Joseph, 2011). Thus, culture is socially constructed by individuals and dynamically changes as members continuously join. Joseph also emphasizes that although individuals will not have identical understandings, the existence of a culture suggests that there are shared systems of meanings as revealed in ideas and public and aesthetic expression. When one understands this meaning of culture, they can make assumptions about other individuals based on their lived experiences and prior knowledge. These assumptions are made based on the generalizations that are socially constructed about a specific cultural group. We transform our frames of reference
through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based (Mezirow, 1997). For educators, having these assumptions and misinformed levels of awareness of a cultural group can create beliefs about a student that is not necessarily true for the child and their family despite their identification with a specific cultural group. To add to this understanding of developing culture, Joseph claims individuals learn their culture and internalize its complex systems of values and behaviors throughout infancy, childhood, and adolescence. These complex systems and patterns of knowledge and interaction are learning through cultural transmissions. Therefore, one is not born into a culture, yet it is absorbed. My understanding of this assertion is reflective through the child-rearing of my only daughter. During her later elementary years, she began to identify culturally as a Black girl. She frequently would define her behaviors and way of speaking as having associations to that which she perceived as the norm for Black girls. Also, she described my discipline methods and values as behavioral patterns familiar and most commonly known as being the path that Black moms raised their children. Given this example of my daughter, she experienced what researchers have coined as patterns to include “action chains” (Hall, 1007; Bohannon, 1995).

The action chains are a fairly predictable series of actions – one followed by another- which takes place and thus “common understanding emerge” (Bohannon, 1995). On the other hand, outside of her understanding of Black culture my daughter began to evaluate the behavior and actions of her non-Black peers once we relocated from Chicago to Houston. According to Joseph (2007), one way to perceive the culture in which we live is to experience the disequilibrium or culture shock by living in another culture. After a
year of residing in Houston, my daughter openly communicated her disapproval of her peer’s behavior. She attributed it to how most White girls handled their teen issues. She disassociated the behavior and actions being accepted as a reaction for Black girls when managing their stress. I use this example to describe how my daughter considered the response to how her peer’s ability to respond to her stress as odd. For children of color in the United States, ethnic/racial awareness can occur through personal recognition and discovery, experiences of oppression (e.g., stigma, discrimination, stereotyping), ethnic-racial socialization, and so forth. It can occur in the context of peers, family, the media, and community interactions. It also occurs at conscious and unconscious levels (Blackmon & Vera, 2008).

I am inspired by the scholar Frank C. Worrell’s (2015) assertions that culture can be interpreted as race and ethnicity with instances where the terms are used interchangeably. Worrell argues that the overlapping use of the terms occur due to the psychological constructs that are attached to such terms as well as the factual evidence that they represent attitudinal rather than developmental views of the world and an acknowledgement that they describe heterogeneous rather than monolithic groups. Furthermore, researchers and scholars indicate the connections between ethnic identity development being considered racial in nature (Cokley, 2005; Paul & Way, 2016; Quintana, 1998). For this writing, I use the term culture to interchangeably refer to both race and ethnicity, allowing for reflexivity.

An educators’ identity is on display through how they structure their classroom environment, embed personal connections within the instructional curriculum, as well as through the engagement with students’, parents, and colleagues. That identity has been
constructed from ones’ culture. Stanfield (2016) has argued, dominant stereotypes in public culture causes and ongoing issue for people of color to define their status and identities. Therefore, the importance of racial identification becomes just as important to African Americans, as does their culture. No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Heyward (2004) explains that individuals typically identify with a range of social or cultural groups, and those cultural groups may overlap. I identify racially as an African American woman. For me, the identification provides awareness and consciousness as it relates to political constructs. In my experience, there seems to be a social acceptance for the term that could be used with little to no condemnation. All individuals possess both racial and ethnic group memberships that influence their identity development (Blackmon and Vera, 2008). Thus, when considering myself from an ethnic, I reference the term, Black. Inspired by the research of Neville and Cross (2017), I have spent time conceptualizing the term, Black. In their study, Neville and Cross explored the context and perceived outcomes of epiphanies in participants’ understanding of what it means to be Black. In majority their findings of participants experienced an “awakening” that allowed for a critical lens into identifying as Black in a racially hierarchical society. Racial awakening maintains Neville and Cross, is characterized by an experience that triggers personal exploration of one’s heritage and the histories of one’s racialized ethnic group or other Black. Racial awakening consists of both an external or epiphanic experiences that promoted increased critical awareness of what it means to Black and also a series of changes that led to establishing a sense of connection to something broader than the individual self. During my first year as an educator in public education, I experienced a racial awakening.
In my first year teaching I experienced an *aha* moment that brought racial awakening to my forefront. This encounter rested in the first actualization that the attainment of a college degree afforded me a level of privilege as a Black female. This realization brought on a sense of feeling pride for creating a narrative for myself that deferred from the stereotypes of a teenage mother. Also, I knew the accomplishment broke a generational curse of limited educational attainment ultimately paving the way for my daughter to conceptualize a possibility that others within my family had never been afforded. At the same time, I was tormented with the realities that I witnessed and heard of from the stories of the students I taught who had not yet fathomed this same conceptualization. I was teaching within communities that were close in proximity to the one I had grown up in and shared identical characteristics based on income, education attainment, crime rates, food deserts. Given the similar characteristics, I felt a greater sense of cultural connectedness to my position as an educator. While that connectedness was visible when speaking through and my actions, I still experience conflicts internally about my identity.

I represent a sense of pride in identifying as a Black female. Social identity is a multifaceted perspective of the self that influences the way individuals explain and make sense of their lives (Blackmon & Vera, 2008). Conflictiongly, I experience a level of consciousness when I converse with individuals from the White racial group. I consider the imaginary line between exuding my intellect and remaining as a non-intellect due to my fear of being perceived based on the stereotypes of my racial background. In those same moments, I feel guilty for not assuming the good intent of individuals with disregard to their ethnic background. Therefore, falling victim to the saying “judging a
book by its cover” and having a greater probability of being incorrect. However, what are the chances that my insecurities are valid notions given the cultural beliefs and lived experiences of the individual in which I encounter?

One of the hardest internal conflicts I experience in my daily interactions is related to the Antiracism Activism which has derived from my racial awakening. According to Pollock et al., (2008), Antiracism Activism consists of everyday actions to help counteract racial inequality and racism in schools and society. The term may offer some negative connotation, with suggestions that some people are racist and others are not. Like Pollock and colleagues, I also believe that the term provides understanding to the positive and proactive gestures that improve the interactives with the school building. Given the extensive amount of time that students and parents engage with staff in the school building, it is an impactful environment. One aspiration that developed from my racial awareness is the active pursuit to promote racial injustice through activism. In the ordinary, undisturbed course of living, we seldom recognize that it is our culture that influences what we take in and pay attention to, what choices we consider to be normal, and what we intend to do about those choices (Hall, 1977). As time has passed, my current positionality requires me to reconsider and reflect on the group of people who will benefit from my aspirations. When I first began my process of racial awareness, I believed that my racial awareness required me to support my own culture and ensure the success of children from my culture. This was because I only had encountered this cultural group during this time. After six years, I changed geographical immersing in a racially and culturally diverse student population than I had been accustomed.
Consequently, I became perplexed in the various ways that culture was interpreted and presented within the Black culture as well as the ability to self-identify with a given culture through a simple check on a box of a home language survey. Being continuously overlooked or mistaken for not being the classroom teacher when individuals visited my classroom, also provided a new awareness. In 2013, Sonia Sotomayor wrote the dissent in _Schuette v. Bamn_, which upheld a Michigan referendum that got rid of affirmative action at state universities. Sotomayor was quoted stating:

Race matters because of the slights, the snickers, the silent judgments that reinforce that most crippling of thoughts: “I do not belong here.”

To not feel like you belong at any age is heart aching. For a child, this level of acceptance from peers and adults as it relates to devaluing of one’s racial and cultural background is unacceptable. I have felt the snickers and judgments that Sotomayor mentions in her comments. It was through the awakening recounted by experiences of my daughter and myself that advocates action for racial and cultural competence within the field of education. In essence, the focus of this scholarly writing requires deconstructing the meaning of racial and cultural competence.

**Racial and Cultural Competence**

Teachers need to critically evaluate the role schools play in generating and legitimizing inequality (ACAR ÇİFTÇİ & GÜROL, 2015). It is not sufficient having the sole focus of teaching being on curriculum change, because the teacher is at the center of the classroom. Researchers have used CRT to inform their claims that racism is so ingrained in our nation's social and institutional structures as to be almost invisible, that the experiences of Whites should not be accepted as normative, and that racism affects
every aspect of education (Bell, 2002; Feagin, 2006). Consequently, the policy should reflect the need to enforce strategies, practices, and standards that allows advancement in the training of educators to engage in racial and cultural competence.

Lindsey et al. (2003) suggest that the desegregation and the subsequent integration of racially different Americans in the 1950-60s sparked the beginnings of the cultural competency movement. During the 1970s, the conversation for quality service for people of color rose in America. The literature documents the prevalence of multiculturalism movements as a need for effective strategies (Lindsey et al, 2003; Hoopes, 1972; Gibson, 1976). Authors and researchers in the field of education have collectively expressed their desire for the focus on culture in education (Emdin, 2016; Larke, 1990; Moule, 2012; Phi Delta Kappa, 1990). Ensuring that students are receiving what they need while educators are continuously developing their understandings of the racial and cultural backgrounds of the children they service. According to ACAR ÇİFTÇİ & GÜROL (2015), components related to personal competency have been explored by scholars as it relates to a variety of levels including but not limited to: knowledge, skills, and values (Person, 2012; Weaver 1997), value/attitude, knowledge, skills (Sue, 2001), attitude/value, knowledge, skills (Cross et al., 1989, Martin and Vaughn, 2007). Within each previously identified study, ACAR ÇİFTÇİ & GÜROL asserts, is a consensus that for educators to embrace their position of teaching a diverse population entirely, they must confront their life experiences and eliminate any prejudices that might negatively affect the learning experience of students. While there is a wide agreement that cultural competence cannot be defined as a singular conceptual term, views differ on what skills and knowledge are encompassed within a culturally competent educator.
Through the use of CRT and drawing from the literature of cultural competency to analyze educators’ narratives, this writing draws on a variety of research to support the definition of racial and cultural competence. Jean Moule (2012) describes cultural competence in schools as “[the development of] certain personal and interpersonal awarenesses and sensitivities, learning specific bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching.” In her writing, Burton-Douglas asserts that scholars who understand cultural competence suggest that classroom interaction between teacher and students should be familiar and similar to what the student experiences in his/her own culture (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014; Yoon, 2012; Hill-Jackson, 2007). Adams (1995) explored a hierarchy of cultural competence, beginning with cultural knowledge, being familiar with aspects of a culture or group (e.g., history, behaviors, values). In her description, Adams expands from knowledge to cultural awareness. Adams defines this awareness as sensitivity to and understanding of another ethnic group that includes changes in attitudes and values that reflects an openness and flexibility when working with others. Davis (1997) operationally defined cultural competence as an ability to integrate and translate knowledge about groups of people into attitudes, standards, policies, and practices that increase the quality of services and produce better outcomes. Scholars Obidah and Teel (2008) were inspired by earlier drafts of Ohio’s Education Standards Board description of cultural competence indicators. These indicators included a description providing a teachers’ ability to:

Use cultural and individual knowledge about their students, their families, and their communities to design instructional strategies that build upon and link home and
school experiences. Challenge stereotypes and intolerance. Serve as change agents by thinking and acting critically to address inequities distinguished by (but not limited to) race, language, culture, socioeconomics, family structures, and gender. (as cited by Peterman, 2004)

From their reading of the indicators, Obidah and Teel (2008) define racial and cultural competency as a teachers’ awareness of power imbalances in classrooms concerning differences in race (their own and that of others) and culture. As a scholarly thinker, I assert the need for racial and cultural competence except all individuals who identify racially or culturally as a person of color. It is not to be assumed that people of color are innately competent to educate a diverse student body.

There is a growing body of research on the topic of Cultural Match (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Jordan, 1985; Valencia, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This existing literature suggests cultural match identifies how students of diverse backgrounds have better access to learning opportunities if classrooms are constructed in ways that are more culturally congruent, compatible, responsive, or synchronized to their home cultures. In their study on the cultural match, Achinstein and Aguirre (2008) challenged the assumption that teachers of color will have a cultural match with their students. Their study critically looks at the experiences of new teachers of color as with a focus on socio-cultural challenges. The data provided convincing evidence showing that students question cultural identifications and thus deemed novice teachers of color as socially suspect. While some of the teachers in the study responded by implementing control-focused teaching, others used the questioning as teachable moments and opportunities to broaden student conceptions. In conclusion, Achinstein and Aguirre’s study revealed that
while a focus on White educators is more prevalent, teachers of color require support when educating students of color. The advocacy of racial and cultural competence is to be taken as a developmental process for all preservice teachers, practicing educators, and stakeholders in the field of education.

Building a framework of cultural competencies as defined by ACAR ÇÎFTÇİ & GÜROL, this writing identifies cultural competencies as follows: (a) awareness; ones’ understanding of how their beliefs and values are affected by cultural conditions. (b) knowledge; understanding the factors that play a role in culturally different individuals’ and groups’ worldviews and interpretation of reality and gaining knowledge of different groups. (c) attitude; mental, emotional and behavioral tendencies of a person formed by their understanding at the level of awareness and knowledge (d) skills; the application of right interventions to ensure culture proper education/teaching. A longstanding, overarching critique of the cultural competence framework is that it lacks the specificity needed to attain any concrete learning or practice objectives (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Furness, 2005; Julia, 2000; Williams, 2006). However, in a study conducted by Betty Achinstein (2008), through the use of interpretive and interactional research, the researchers concluded it was found that both individuals and institutions shape socialization. Therefore, to limit the cultural competence framework to a set and prescribed list of attributes, values, and behaviors deemed obtainable in a sequential process of mastery is unrealistic. One does not accomplish being racially and culturally competent given, the dynamics of change within the social constructs of race and culture.

Teachers are responsible for continually revising and transforming themselves to meet the needs of all students. When the cultural features of students in a classroom are
different from those of the teacher, educating these students becomes harder (Brown, 2007). It is crucial to realize that through developing relationships with students’, teachers are constructing a perception about each child. This perception is formed based on what teachers observe, hear, and how they interact with their students. Also, teacher perceptions provide context for which educators use to enhance their racial and cultural knowledge base. Yet, this knowledge does not guarantee enhanced teaching for improving the academic success of students of color. Delpit (1995) cautioned that knowledge of race and culture is but one device educators may use in reaching diverse youth. In its complexity culture is not static has consistent change that requires an educator to remain flexible in their knowledge of their students’. The flexibility speaks to the need for racial and culturally competent educators acknowledging the changes in their students’ everyday lives in the world, which impacts their learning.

Culturally competent teachers have the attitude to properly acknowledge students from different backgrounds (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). These attitudes shape the planning and implementation of state standards and curricular lessons. Therefore, a racial and culturally competent educator must analyze the curriculum values for which they implement in their classroom. Edward Fergus (2008), argues that the responsibility of being racially and culturally competent is knowing when and how to confront the pervasive racist assaults that occur. From my experience as an educator, many planning protocols with curriculum require teachers to ask themselves, “What misconceptions may students’ subscribe to during the implementation of this lesson?”. To answer this question, teachers’ must know their student’s racial and cultural backgrounds and use that to confront the underlined ideologies embedded within their curriculum. There must be a
shift away from prescribed and historically enforced ideologies when educating children of color. Through the use of culturally relevant and responsive teaching strategies, teachers can enhance themselves at being racially and culturally competent.

**Practice**

Darling-Hammond (1997) posits that “in the context of today’s higher standards and the growing diversity of students in schools, the lack of adequate teacher preparation for so many teachers in urban and poor schools is troubling”. Some researchers have gone so far to state that teachers are the most valuable influence on student performance in the classroom. Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) researched five subject areas, three grade levels, and 60,000 students, examining factors that contributed to improved student performance. The results of the study found the most important factor affecting student learning is a teacher. Research has found that reliable teacher education results in teachers’ significantly greater use of strategies that produce higher-order learning and that respond to students’ experiences, needs, and learning approaches (Berger & McLynch, 2006). However, regardless of the strategies and resources provided to teacher candidates during their certification programs, there must remain a focus on candidates engaging in the topics of race and culture. Researchers have found that many candidates have negative beliefs about individuals who are different from them, despite their willingness to teach in diverse school settings (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). These beliefs left unexplored can impact students negatively. It is essential to explore the ideologies the negative that are contributing to the curriculum, as well as the suggestive alternatives.
Scholarly Academic Ideology

One profoundly rooted curriculum ideology present within schools historically and today is centered on Scholarly Academic ideology. In the view of Scholar Academic proponents, the purpose of education is to help children receive the accumulated knowledge of our culture: that of the academic disciplines (Schiro, 2013). Seen as a top-down knowledge attainment where those experts of content determine knowledge to be followed by creating a curriculum to teach each discipline of such content. According to this approach, culture is perceived as canonical text that is essentially Western, white, and middle class. This dominant culture should not be imposed on all student body regardless of their racial, ethnic, or lingual background (Hirsch et al., 1983; Bloom, 1987).

Sleeter and Stillman (2005) emphasized that many of the state’s curriculum standards fit within a political movement to reconfigure power relations among racial, ethnic, language, and social class groupings. Sleeter and Stillman (2005) assert the Civil Rights Movement spawned various movements to redistribute power, which in education took forms such as school desegregation, multicultural education, and bilingual education. However, the researchers raise the question of to what extent can the standards movement be understood as an attempt to restore earlier power relations? Sleeter and Stillman concluded that in such a situation, knowledge derived from students’ experience is subordinated to school knowledge. In this analysis, state standards lack all connectivity to the individual and their lived experiences. If a student hasn’t gained or had an adequate amount of time to develop a skill, they are still required to proceed. Scholar academics believe that worthwhile curriculum knowledge is objective rather than subjective in nature (Schiro, 2013). Schiro (2013) explains that academics who subscribe to this
ideology are confident about the reliability of tests, collecting data from assessments, or using the data that they collect to make comparisons.

**Multicultural Education**

On the other hand, Multicultural education shares a stark difference from Scholarly Academic Ideology in its approach to curriculum. While Scholarly Academic Ideology focuses on providing a predetermined knowledge base, Multicultural education values the unique and multifaceted funds of knowledge that each student embodies. Multicultural educators contend that any attempt to construct a knowledge base for classroom teachers should recognize the important roles that race, culture, language, gender, and class currently play in the United States (Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001a; Lee, 2007; Milner, 2003; Nieto, 2003). According to Carl Grant (2016), from a multicultural perspective, no one way of viewing the world, no one cultural standard, political doctrine, or ideology can represent the full truth and value of human life; therefore, multicultural education is essential to school and society. According to assertions made by Grant, some scholars believed that race alone should be the focus of multicultural education; others contended that the focus should be broadened to include other groups that were and are similarly oppressed: the poor, women, and people with disability were the groups considered for inclusion at the time. Grant emphasizes that the confusion over the definition and terms used to discuss concepts and issues of diversity was difficult at the theoretical and teaching level. Multicultural education traces its roots back to African American scholars from the late 19th and early 20th centuries such, as Carter G. Woodson, Charles H. Wesley, and W. E. B Du Bois. All of them worked for
more significant societal equity and educational opportunities for African Americans (Banks, 2004).

Multicultural educators argue that teachers must teach with what Irvine (2003) refers to as “a cultural eye,” wherein teachers view their world and the work that they do through a cultural lens that allows them to be change agents in the academic performance of culturally diverse students. The works of Giroux (1992), McCarthy (1988), and McLaren (1988) are often touted as critical multicultural education, which places additional emphasis on structural inequities and calls for radical social and economic reconstruction. The field of multicultural education has grown considerably in its conceptual and theoretical depth but is nevertheless criticized for being less transparent in its practical implementation (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). Although a plethora of factors contributes to the structural poverty that has plagued millions of students across the United States, inclusive, critical multicultural education as a school reform movement is a promising path to ensuring educational equity for all students.

**Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), which is used interchangeably with culturally responsible, culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally relevant, and multiculturalism, describes a variety of teaching approaches shown to be effective in culturally diverse classrooms (Irvine & Armento, 2001). The philosophical and pedagogical foundations of culturally relevant pedagogy are rooted in multicultural education. Studies have found that culturally responsive and relevant education can help to bridge the connectedness with school to improve learning (Kalyanpur, 2012; Ttaum, 2009). It is an educator’s thoughts and opinions about the students they teach, which can
directly impact student academic and behavior outcomes (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Irvine, 2003; Johnson & Atwater, 2014; Pajaraes, 1992). Children look to their teacher for support and, in most cases, validation. When that validation is not provided, a student may be left with a low sense of self-efficacy. In practice, I’ve heard educators proclaim comments such as “These kids just can’t do that” or “They will never be able to do all the standards say”. This type of thinking is based on the idea that students have a deficit. Scholars have acknowledged that culturally diverse and low-income students are not deficient, but are different in their cultural and cognitive abilities (Boykin, 1994; Hale-Benson, 1986; Kochman, 1981; Lee, 1995, 2007). Given their differences and unique backgrounds, educators must not only seek to teach but also position themselves in the place of a learner inside their classrooms. Restructuring pedagogy to ensure students of color is necessary given, the institutionalized racism and disparities in academic data.

Gay (2000), who refers to CRP as culturally responsive teaching, claims it involves teachers creating a classroom environment that welcomes diverse learners, cultivates relationships with all parents, incorporates high learning expectations, and establishes a community of learners. Ensuring students’ diversity, funds of knowledge, and interests are an asset essential to culturally responsive and relevant educators. Dixson and Fasching-Varner (2009) highlight in their scholarly writing the composite of a culturally relevant teacher:

- Know that the children they teach are tied to their futures and destinies.
- Consistently challenge themselves to learn about their students and their students’ culture and community
- See themselves in the eyes of their students
● Organize learning so that it builds on and maximizes students’ strengths

● Maintain the utmost respect for their students and their students’ families

● Develop meaningful relationships with their students and families

● Believe that they are teaching for social change and social justice

● Create an intellectually rich and stimulating classroom environment

In her book *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings (1997) describes cultural relevance as being more than just a teacher’s awareness of and facility with language and suggests that,

Culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture… for example, by not seeing the one’s history, culture, or background represented by the textbook or curriculum or by seeing that history, culture, or background distorted. The primary aim of culturally relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a “relevant black personality” that allows African-American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture.

Adding to that understanding, scholar Zaretta Hammond (2015), defines culturally responsive teaching simply as:

An educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning making 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 educators understands the importance of being in relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning.

To account for the literature on the topic as it relates to this writing, using the definitions of both culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching together will help to navigate the lens for which can support racially and culturally competent educators. The first step in the process requires the teacher to become open and ready to discuss race and culture within their classrooms. Hammond (2015) emphasizes deep culture, not the heroes and holidays of surface culture, is at the core of culturally responsive teaching. Researchers Gay and Kirkland (2003), advocate that it is not enough for teachers to have courageous conversations about racism and social injustices, to appreciate cultural differences, and accept the need to be reflective in their personal beliefs and professional practices. All three scholars emphasize the need to practice engaging in cultural critical consciousness and personal reflection.

Educator critical consciousness must exist before critical pedagogy can be enacted. A culturally responsive curriculum means designing a curriculum that includes information about the histories, cultures, contributions, experiences, perspectives, and issues of various ethnic groups (Gay, 2000). Given this redesign of curriculum, students’ knowledge is valued. Thus, students can critically approach learning and are involved with the teacher to construct knowledge. Ladson-Billings (1994) found that students performed better and were more successful in school when the curricula were meaningful to them, and students performed best when the instruction matched where they were in
their learning. Being aware of, and avoiding perpetuating, a culturally or racially biased ‘hidden’ or latent curriculum (Banks, 2009; Glatthorn & Jailall, 2009; Pai & Adler, 1997) that is often taught in schools is a key component of a culturally relevant curriculum. Pai and Adler (1997) define the hidden curriculum as the indirect means by which schools teach students the norms and values of their society. They further suggest that,

Hidden curriculum may vary according to socioeconomic status, with upper-class children being taught leadership skills and having opportunities for creativity and problem solving in contrast to low-income students being taught to respect authority and receiving rewards for compliance and conformity. (p. 19)

By taking the instructional time to discuss race and culture in the classroom, educators; are allowing opportunities for students of color to understand and take ownership of their academic achievement. Singleton (2006) encourages teachers and school leaders to have a courageous conversation about race. Until we confront race intentionally in schools, we will not be able to effectively close a gap or improve the academic achievement of our students of color (Pollack, 2004; Singleton, 2006).

Another aspect to consider when implementing culturally relevant and responsive teaching includes understanding communication styles amongst students. In the classroom environment, teachers expect students to respond in a particular way. Students of color benefit from communication that is participatory-active (Kochman, 1985, as cited by Gay, 2000). Within a classroom that embodies participatory-active, the speaker expects listeners to engage them actively through vocalized, motion, and movement responses as they are speaking. In my experience in turnaround schools, this type of
response from students could easily be perceived as defiance, disrespect, disengagement, and disruptive to the instruction.

Researchers Jones, Bustamante, and Nelson (2016) concluded in their study of 400 pre-service teachers, that to help teachers achieve goals of culturally competent, relevant, and responsive instruction, an understanding of how future teachers perceive their training needs related to working with culturally and linguistically diverse students should be considered. Researchers have advocated for the need to ensure educators receive training in cultural diversity awareness (Brown, 2004; Walker-Dallhouse & Dallhouse, 2006; Quappe & Canttatore, 2007). It is time for educational policy to listen to the voices of the practitioners in the field, review the research provided to the field, and act to ensure transformation within the field begins to support students of color.

Summary

The opening vignette of this chapter demonstrated the unique use of a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to construct the relevant literature related to this scholarly writing. Accordingly, I was able to present the lived experiences of my grandmothers as it relates to the historical perspective of education. After that, I presented context for policy development on teacher training programs as it relates to the two routes to educator certification. More importantly, the main literature as it relates critical theory, critical race theory, culture and identity, and racial and cultural competence establish the theoretical framework grounded in this scholarly writing. In conclusion, the literature review focused on the topic of practice. This focus entailed a historical perspective of scholarly academic ideology with its foundation within the
school curriculum. I then offer current literature that advocates for the transformation of educator practice and curriculum changes.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will present the methodology and research design of this study that focuses on the topic of educators’ racial and cultural competence. The following research questions will inform this exploration:

1. How do educators construct the meaning of racial and cultural competence?
2. What are these educators’ perspectives on how racial and cultural competence can provide support to the academic success of a diverse student population?
3. How do these educators describe and enact the curriculum based on the racial and cultural backgrounds of their students?

Through the use of a narrative inquiry and a critical lens, this study explored the perception and experiences of public-school educators as it relates to racial and cultural competence in the context of their classroom practice. The chapter will begin by describing the qualitative research, narrative inquiry, and critical approaches that frame the design of this research. In the second part of the chapter, I will present an in-depth description of the participants, site of this study, and data collection procedures. Additionally, I will present methods for data analysis, as well as consider the plans to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. Finally, the concluding sections will describe the role of the researcher and the ethical considerations involved in protecting the identity of the study’s participants.

Research Methodological Approach

For this study, a qualitative research approach was used as an overarching methodology with a particular emphasis on two approaches within this research family,
narrative inquiry, and critical research lens. These methodological approaches were chosen to create a dialogue with the reader to share the perspectives of participants. In the following sections, I will describe the hallmarks, assumptions, and procedures that distinguish these approaches to research.

**Qualitative Research.** Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Thus, qualitative research enables the researcher to explore the perceptions and constructs of individuals while keeping those individuals at the heart of their study. Qualitative research uses inductive and deductive reasoning to establish patterns and themes, uses the voices of participants, includes the reflexivity of the researcher, and, most importantly, provides multifaceted interpretations of the problem (Creswell, 2013).

Within this study, the voices of the participants will help to establish the patterns and themes while providing their own interpretations of racial and cultural competence for elementary educators, given a diverse student population. Efron and Ravid (2019, p. 17) eloquently define qualitative research by explaining:

For qualitative researchers, knowledge is socially constructed by the subjective meanings that people assign to their reality. From this perspective, the social reality is experienced differently by individuals and communities depending on their social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. Knowledge is, therefore, multiple, subjective, situational, value-laden, and tentative. The purpose of research is not to explain the social world but rather to understand it from the perspective of the participants. Rich descriptions of the social environment
through the eyes of the people in the setting allow a deeper understanding of the complexities involved.

Given the understanding of qualitative research, it provides this exploration the ability to focus on the realities of the participants involved. This inquiry seeks to explore cultural description while honoring the professional and personal experiences that help to shape the participant’s understanding of racial and cultural competence. Thus, the use of qualitative research will allow readers to hear the voices of educators and their experiences in a diverse public-school setting.

Additionally, qualitative research allows for norms, traditions, roles, and values to be considered (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To understand the topic of racial and cultural competence, a qualitative researcher often considers the socially constructed patterns present in a setting. These patterns, coupled with the perceptions of the participants, provide meaning beyond statistical data. People express the meaning they make about some aspects of their lives by defining what is real (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The use of this meanings provides the ability to produce knowledge that is relevant to the field of education. Qualitative research often is not restricted to the production of knowledge or insights for scientific purposes. Usually, the intention is to change the issue under study or to produce knowledge that is practically relevant—which means relevant for producing or promoting solutions to practical problems (Flick, 2008).

Within this qualitative research umbrella, I will employ methods that blend the characteristics of both narrative inquiry and critical race methodology. This multi-level methodology is appropriate to meet the needs of:
1. Discussing the social constructs of race and culture as it relates to a diverse student population within the public-school setting

2. Valuing the knowledge for which the participants provide given their lived experiences

3. Giving me as the researcher, the ability to intertwine my life history, experiences and understanding into the conversation for data analysis

**Narrative Inquiry.** Within the family of qualitative research, my study will employ the *narrative inquiry* approach. Riessman and Speedy (2007), ardently explore the term narrative and its’ process:

> The term narrative carries many meanings and is used in a variety of ways by different disciplines, often synonymously with *story* (...) the narrative scholar (pays) analytic attention to how the facts got assembled that way. For whom was this story constructed, how was it made and for what purpose? What cultural discourses does it draw on—take for granted? What does it accomplish?

This quote expresses the complexities narrative research engages in to critically question what is understood at the surface. Narrative inquiry is a method that views lives holistically and assumes that people construct their realities through narrating their stories (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The use of narrative inquiry explores how we understand human experience with the focus on storytelling (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). Researchers who follow this model of inquiry emphasize the value of stories told and lived by individuals as situated and should be understood within the larger cultural, social, familial, and institutional narratives (Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013).
Narrative inquiry positions the researcher as viewing themselves and their participants’ as co-composing the exploration given the topic of study. The use of narrative inquiry allows the research participants’ the opportunity to reflect upon their lived experiences as they are telling their stories to the researcher. At the same time, the researcher is also allowed to bring their voice and understanding.

Through the use of narrative inquiry, the stories of the participants are the medium of learning for the researcher to understand. A narrative may be oral or written and can be elicited by an interview or a naturally occurring conversation. Beverley (2005) proposes that a narrative may include:

- A short topical story about a particular event and specific characters such as an encounter with a friend, boss, or doctor
- An extended story about a significant aspect of one’s life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, an illness, a trauma, or participation in a war or social movement
- A narrative about one’s entire life

It was the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s that helped to reinvigorate the life of oral (life) history method. One example of this method was represented by the narrative’s slaves shared through the civil rights movements. Recognized by deposits in the Library of Congress, oral histories of former slaves were available to the public (Beverley, 2005).

**Critical Research Lens.** There is an essential body of theory and research that focuses on issues of race and culture (Gunaratnam, 2003; Lewis, 2006; Ball, 2000; Gay, 2000; James, 2004; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). In similarity, it is my claim that
as a person of color, it is vital that I conduct my analysis through a critical lens. Cruz (2001) maintained that scholars of color have had to “create and develop alternative spaces and methodologies for the study of the communities” to more fully and appropriately capture and represent lived experiences among populations of color (as cited by Milner, 2007). Critical approaches have a social justice orientation that looks at how power and hegemonic discourses shape experience and understanding (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Critical qualitative research takes qualitative research beyond interpretation and questions how individuals interact with the world around them. Thus, critical qualitative research is about questioning and challenging power relationships, including those related to race, gender, class, ethnicity, etc., as well as the intersection of those social constructs (Merriam et al., 2002). Therefore, critical approaches reject and challenge binary categories that seek to polarize and essentialize difference (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011).

As noted in chapter 2, critical race methodology was founded on the premise that race and racism are perceived as normal (Brayboy, 2005; Jones et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). With the use of critical race methodology, the research will challenge dominant ideologies, White privilege, deficit-based thinking, and objectivity present in traditional research. Challenging such thinking requires the researcher to engage in reflexivity, recognizing one’s race and other identities to inform the research process. Reflexivity is the awareness that “all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced; it is grounded in both the social locations and the social biography of the observer and the observed” (Mann and Kelley, 1997 as cited by Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, p38). Milner (2007) emphasized
that his framework rejects practices in which scholars remove themselves from the research process, particularly when they reject their “racialized and cultural positionality.” In his framework for critical research lens, Milner provides three interrelated features:

1. *Researching the self* - scholars engaging in evolving and emergent critical race and culture self-reflection
2. *Researching the self in relation to others* - reflect about self in relation to the people and communities involved in the study. Recognize the various roles, identities, and positions that both the researcher and participants bring to the research process
3. Engaged reflection and representation - scholars and participants should participate in (engage reflection and representation), a collaborative process of reflection (with race and culture centered). Supporting the interpretation of an experience or interaction based on each individual’s lived experiences

The inability to remove myself from this exploratory research process is, in my eyes, essential in this study. Critical race scholars recognize that their race and other identities inform the research process (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In such, I can allow my subjectivity to bring new knowledge to the research process.

**Research Design**

**Research Participants**

There are three participants involved in this exploration. To provide confidentially, participants will be referred to by a pseudonym. Each participant is someone I work with at Bailey Crown Elementary (a pseudonym is used). The
participants selected for this research were determined based on convenience sampling. Convenience sampling occurs when participants are selected due to their availability and willingness to participate in the research project and whose general characteristics fit the research study’s general goals (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Based on the purpose of this research, the following characteristics helped in selecting participants:

- full-time employed certified educator holding a valid teaching license
- more than three years of teaching experience in public schools setting servicing a diverse student population (as determined by state reporting school demographic categories)
- willingness to articulate personal understanding as it relates to the topic of racial and cultural competence of educators
- more than one-year teaching at the selected research site
- diversity in racial and cultural self-identification

**Participant 1.** Rick is a 44-year-old male born in Buffalo, Wyoming, and self identifies racially as White. Rick culturally identifies as Scottish English. The participant is married and has no children. He has seventeen years of experience in the field of education. Rick’s degrees include a Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education and two Master’s degrees: one in international teaching and the other in Global eLearning. Rick expressed each school he has worked in consisted of a high percentage of low-income families.

Throughout his years of experience, Rick has educated students in varying geographical locations across the world, including the United States (Colorado and Texas) and South America (Venezuela). Rick has worked with children from many different cultural and racial backgrounds, including but not limited to: Venezuelan,

**Participant 2.** Sandra is a 33-year-old female born in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, who self identifies racially as Alaskan Native American. Sandra culturally identifies as a Native American. The participant is married and has been a relationship with her spouse for 11 years. Sandra has three female children, ages 4, 7, and 12. She has eight years of experience in the field of education with a bachelor’s degree in Interdisciplinary Studies. Prior to her professional career in education, Sandra explored a career in the field of nursing. Sandra chose the field of education because she wanted to help people, yet could not handle witnessing deaths that came with the field of nursing. Throughout her years of experience, Sandra has educated students in the geographical location within the city of Houston and Katy. Sandra has worked with children from many different cultural and racial backgrounds, including Nigerian, Latin American, African American, and Asian. All three schools where Sandra has serviced in schools that had high numbers and percentages of children from low-income families. Sandra currently teaches 1st grade at Bailey Crown Elementary.

**Participant 3.** Denise is a 40-year-old female born in Trinidad who self identifies racially as Black and culturally as Trinidadian. Since the age of 5, she was raised in Brooklyn, New York. The participant is married with a son that is one year old. Denise has fourteen years of experience in the field of education. Before her career in education, Denise was employed by a youth program in the city of New York. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology from City College of New York. Denise has educated students in the geographical regions of Texas and Germany. Throughout her teaching
career, Denise has taught children from cultural and racial backgrounds that are Black, Hispanic, and White. She has worked in charter and public schools that had high numbers and percentages of children from low-income families. Denise currently works as a math support interventionist for grades 3-5 at Bailey Crown Elementary.

**Research Site**

The research site will uniquely consist of the settings presented within the formative histories of the participants, including but not limited to their professional practice and lived experiences. All participants, including myself as the researcher, are currently employed as classroom educators and instructional support personnel for the school site. Bailey Crown Elementary is located in a suburban school district. The school district consists of 72 schools that include 42 elementary schools, 16 junior high schools, eight high schools, and six schools with specialities that service students for behavioral and technical education. The student enrollment of the district is 84,299. The student demographics consist of 36.01% Hispanic, 32.66% White, 15.79% Asian, 11.80% African American, 3.34% Two or More Races, 0.27% Native American, and 0.13% Pacific Islander. Within the district, there is a total of 10, 273 employees, 5,274 are teachers. Based on data presented by the district public website, representation of teachers by ethnicity is respectively: White 3,890, 770.7 Hispanic, 378.5 African American, 154.8 Asian, 23 Indian, and 4 Pacific Islanders.

Bailey Crown Elementary is located in the center of the Bailey Crown community, surrounded by single-family homes. Two large apartment complexes are also zoned to the school. The school has been open for 43 years and was the 6th elementary school to open in the district. During the school year of 2019-2020, Bailey Crown
Elementary reported a total student enrollment of 747 students in grades pre-kindergarten to fifth. The demographic summary for the student population indicates that 71.49% Hispanic, 13.39% White, 12.18% Black or African American, 1.74 Asian, 0.67% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.54% identifying as Two or more races. The school has a population of 50.7% of students that are identified as English Language Learners, 38.5% Bilingual, 12.6% English as a Second Language, and 18.3% identified as receiving Special Education services. For the 2020-2021 school year, the school will be under the leadership of a new principal after having the same principal for the past 13 years.

**Data Collection Strategies**

This exploration employed a narrative structure with the ability to gain life and oral histories, interviews, and document review as data collection tools. Challenging oneself through the process of research collection is a reflexive process for which the research questions of this exploration provide an opportunity. As such, the use of written and oral histories provided context of the participants and give insight into how the formative years and lived experiences may or may not be a part of their racial and cultural identity. An oral history is a method form of qualitative research that involves gathering narrative- written, oral or visual- focusing on the meanings that people relate to their experiences while seeking to provide “insight that (befits) the complexity of human lives” (Josselson, 2006). Each participant will complete an oral history prior to their first interview. Upon their first interview, questions focused on enhancing the oral history of their lives. When allowing participants to present their oral histories, it is essential to acknowledge the dependency on memory that will be required of the participants.
However, it is often only in retrospect that we begin to understand and give meaning to events (Polkinghorne, 1995). It is through the use of rich descriptions that will allow for a more in-depth understanding of the complexities involved in the retelling of their lived experiences. The following criteria will be considered for the oral histories of the participants, as suggested by Jones (1983, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2016):

1. The individual is viewed as a member of a culture: the life history “describe(s) and interpret(s) the actor’s account of his or her development in the common-sense world.

2. The method captures the significant role that others play in “transmitting socially defined stocks of knowledge.”

3. The assumptions of the cultural world under study should be described and analyzed as they are revealed in rules and codes for conduct as in myths and rituals.

4. Life histories should focus on the experience of an individual over time so that the “processual development of the person” can be captured

5. The cultural world under study should be continuously related to the individuals unfolding life story.

Another technique employed for data collection will be in-depth interviewing. The primary strategy is to capture the deep meaning of experience in participants’ own words (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This exploration with a focus on the individual participants and their lived experience to share their perceptions of the topic of racial and cultural competence. The goal is to conduct semi-structured interviews with each
participant. Efron and Ravid (2019), articulate the defining components of the semi-structured interview:

The semi-structured interview is based on questions that were prepared prior to the interview. These are open-ended questions. During the interviews, participants are invited to co-construct the narrative and raise and pursue issues that are related to the study but were not included when the interview questions were planned. Additionally, when more clarification is needed or unexpected information is revealed, the teacher interviewer asks follow-up questions and probes further to encourage the participant to extend and deepen his or her responses (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 98).

The goal of the interviews is to produce narratives from the participants. These narratives will allow for the opportunity to learn about their social life through the perspective, experience, and language of the living. All interviews will be conducted outside of the participant’s contractual time to the school district. Given participant consent, each meeting will be recorded to support the accuracy of transcription and reflection for the researcher. The interviews for each participant occurred across the span of the first nine weeks of the grading term based on the academic calendar. The time frame was selected based on the goal of the research to allow participants to share their experiences with their new group of students and policies implemented by the school district. The following is the interview guide that will be the source of my interview questions. As traditionally in qualitative studies, this is a semi-structured interview based on open-ended questions. The questions invite the interviewees to share particular relevant stories
and encourage critical awareness of the issues they discuss. The questions present the three separate sessions I plan conducting with each participant:

1st Interview: Life History

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Tell me about your family and the relationships within the family. What was their attitude to schooling and learning?

3. Can you share your story with me as a student, before becoming an educator?

4. Describe how your culture, family, and community values was presented in your school. Please relate specific examples to illustrate your point.

5. What role, if any, did your family experiences or other life experiences play into your decision to teach? Can you share a story or stories that demonstrate these experiences?

6. Thinking back over your teacher preparation program, tell me about the most memorable experience that helped you to understand the responsibilities of the career you chose to become an educator?

7. Describe, if it all, your experience with professional trainings or coursework focused on race and culture? Choose a course or two and relate specific examples that allow me to understand the experience.

8. Is there anything else you would like to share about yourself?

2nd Interview: Educator Considerations

9. How would you describe “academic success”?

10. Tell me about a recent experience in which you considered your students in the process of planning and implementing instruction?
11. Describe the process you engage in to build relationships with your students?

12. Define your understanding of the term “racial and cultural competence” as it relates to educators? What does it mean in practice?

13. How does, if at all, your racial and cultural identity impact your practice as an educator?

14. Explain how different, if at all, is your experience with building relationships with students who do not share the same racial and cultural background as you?

15. In what ways, can being culturally and racially competent support the academic success of your student population?

3rd Interview: Policy Considerations

16. Describe a situation, if any, for which you disagreed with a policy implemented by your school administrators or district as it relates to the lack of consideration for students and families?

17. What is your perception, as it relates to how your school district considers the racial and cultural backgrounds of the student population when selecting curriculum materials and resources?

18. What is your perception, as it relates to how your school considers the racial and cultural backgrounds of the student population when discussing curriculum implementation and data analysis?

19. Can you elaborate on what you believe are ways your district can support the process of classroom educators engaging in the topic of racial and cultural competence?
20. Can you explain your perception concerning teacher training programs and their ability to prepare educators for the racially and culturally diverse student population within public schools today?

21. Explain how different, if at all, has your perception changed concerning racial and cultural competence for school educators?

This framework of questions will serve as the basis of the interview. Roulston (2010) emphasizes, the interview guide provides the same starting point for each semi-structured interview, yet each interview will vary according to what is said by individual interviewees. As a qualitative researcher I will remain flexible during interviewing to allow active listening to explore topics, related to the research questions, that may arise based on participants responses. I will probably rephrase, add follow-up probing questions or pursue issues that are not included in the interview guide (Efron & Ravid, 2020). The anticipated implementation for this research will occur in the Fall of 2020, given approval of the research board. At any given point, a participant doesn’t feel comfortable or safe with sharing their lived experiences and perceptions about their practice; they will be allowed to terminate the interview.

The final collection technique for this research will include documentation review. The use of documentation as it relates to the Strategic Planning Design for the school district is essential to the discussion of this research. The collection of documentation will provide a comprehensive and historical context to the research site and participants. Document review includes the analysis of written materials comprising information about cases to be studied (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011). Each document produced to highlight the vision, goals and policies with the school district of the research
site will be analyzed to draw patterns and themes for analysis as it relates to the participant interviews. The collected data provided from my participants and the documents attempt to understand the complexities of the topic of racial and cultural competency from the perspective of educators and will be used for the sole purposes of this research.

**Data Analysis**

First, we collect the data and then we analyze to understand (Joseph, 2011). Given the three in-depth interviews consisting of more than 45 minutes each, with each participant, a large amount of data is expected to be collected throughout this research process. A copy of the transcripts will be given to the participants to ensure the accuracy of storytelling and responses. A sophisticated coding process will occur for transcribing interviews and oral histories. Coding is a constructed act- codes are both suggested by the “texts” of our research and suggested by those involved in the research (Kress, 2011).

After coding the data, there will be a categorizing system created. Categories will not be pre-determined, as to allow for natural emerging from the text. Kress (2011) emphasizes the importance of a data categorization system for organizing and sorting data into general categories. This process will include synthesizing the transcript data to determine the possibilities of emerging of themes. Finally, recording the categories and adding quotations that represent each category will help to demonstrate the content of each category (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 178).

Narrative analysis is well suited for this research, mainly due to its relationship to the theoretical framework of transformational learning. Narrative analysis is used to analyze the stories told by the individual participants (Merriam, S. B., & Kim, S., 2012).
The use of narrative analysis will allow the participants to share their personal experiences of transformational learning through their stories.

**Validity and Trustworthiness**

It is fundamental as a researcher to ensure the study’s trustworthiness and validity for the sake of the study’s participants, readers, stakeholders. The convenience of selecting participants from my current worksite provides the benefit of having a sense of trust and comfort. However, as the researcher, I acknowledge my subjectivity about the topic, my relationships with the participants and my familiarity with the research site that I and the research participants co-exist within.

Triangulation is the practice of relying on more than one source of data by using multiple methods or obtaining varied perspectives (Efron & Ravid, 2019). Using a triangulation of data sources and analytics perspectives will support the creditability of the findings with the research. Implementing a variety of methods to collect data will help the quality of the data rendered. When working with the participants, clarification of comments during the discussion will occur to alleviate misinterpretations. As the researcher, I will engage in a member check with participants to help ensure validity. Through member checks, the participants can correct the researcher’s (perhaps not quite accurate) representations of their worlds (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

**Researcher Role**

In qualitative research, in general, and in narrative inquiry and critical research approaches in particular, the researcher is not an objective bystander observing from a distance but is a subjective participant who “enters the research process from inside an interpretive community” (Denzin & Lincoln, 200, p. 18). I work for the same school
district within the same school building as the participants. Given the relationship
between the participants and the researcher when collecting life histories is essential that
the researcher employ sensitivity, caring, and empathy (Cole & Knowles, 2001 as cited in
Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The research allows the subjectivity required to explore the
research questions that ground this study. While also providing my own lived
experiences, history, and reflexivity, I bring myself into the research. Reflexivity means
self-awareness and considering the potential impact of one’s values, worldview, and life
experience and their influence on the decisions made and actions taken during the
research process (Efron & Ravid, 2019). My inclusion in the research will allow me to
make meaning of the data that emerges. My lived experiences have supported inspiration
in the development of this research. As it relates to this research, I believe that all
educators despite, racial or cultural backgrounds, should engage in the process of cultural
competence. As a researcher, I’m aware that I possess judgments given my own racial
and cultural understandings gained through my lived experiences. I’m committed to
ensuring transparency with honest and moral actions in the implementation of this
research.

**Ethical Considerations**

I plan to engage in this research with the approval of the Institutional Research
Board (IRB) and the successful completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training
Initiative (CITI) modules. The ethical issues that may arise in life history or narrative
inquiry, as with many types of interviewing, center on the relationship with participants
(Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To support the protection of each participant’s identity and
facts of their private life, including the research site, pseudonyms are used. It is essential
as a researcher that I allow each participant to share their perceptions and opinion without intruding on their thought processes. Keeping the participants’ voices at the forefront of this exploration is a priority. At any point in the process, participants will be allowed to withdraw their participation within the research with no adverse consequences. At the end of each interview, I will allow for participants to ask questions and provide comments concerning any information provided during the interview.

The informed consent lets respondents know about the research and what role they will play in it (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Informed consent will be provided to participants to sign acknowledging their rights and information related to the research. The consent will inform participants of the request to be recorded during interviews. Participants will be allowed to ask questions regarding the research process and goals. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) assert it may be difficult for a researcher using a qualitative approach to approximate full disclosure in an informed consent letter because qualitative research, by its very nature, is open to discovery; a change in research goals may be particularly difficult to anticipate. However, it is the informed consent that provides the research with another opportunity to engage in reflexivity.

There is not a conflict between my research goals and professional responsibilities. Ensuring the safety of my colleagues will remain at the forefront of this research. With respect towards the site of the study, I will ensure all interviews and data collection are conducted outside of contractual hours. I’m committed to maintaining honesty and accuracy when gathering and interpreting the data.
Summary

This chapter began with an introduction presenting the understanding of qualitative research. The design approach of narrative inquiry, critical qualitative research, and critical race methodologies was highlighted as a perspective appropriate to this research. The following were the descriptors that distinguished the connection between the participants and the research site. Finally, the chapter closed with data collection and analysis, focused on communicating the role of the researcher and ethical considerations that will be implemented to ensure the integrity of the research process. This proposed plan is a blueprint for the research and can be modified to meet the needs of any unexpected circumstances.
Chapter IV

DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter analyzes the data collected from the participant’s lived-experience stories, one-on-one in-depth interviews, and document review. The purpose of this research was to explore the perception and experiences of public-school educators as it relates to racial and cultural competence in the context of their career and classroom practice. This study was centered around the following research questions:

1. How do educators construct the meaning of racial and cultural competence?

2. What are these educators’ perspectives on how racial and cultural competence can provide support to the academic success of a diverse student population?

3. How do these educators describe and enact the curriculum based on the racial and cultural backgrounds of their students?

I begin with a reflection into the methodology used, including the processes for data collection and analysis. Following, I offer a description of each participant that provides the reader with an introduction to the participants. Next, I present an in-depth analysis of the interviews. Document analysis will help position the conversation on administrative leaders' policies and curriculum decisions in the final sections. Engaging in a document analysis expands on the data collection that occurred in the third and final interview for the participants. The conclusion of the document analysis section incorporates the ideas of the participating teachers regarding the policies and decisions analyzed within the documents.

This research was implemented using a multi-level methodology approach blending narrative inquiry and critical race methodology. I allowed the participants to explain how
their knowledge was constructed by narrating their lived experiences within the narrative inquiry method. Through storytelling, the participants provided a context of their lives that helped them in their role as an educator. To explore the larger social district that is racially and culturally diverse, I used the lens of critical race theory (CRT). Critical race theorists argue for placing race at the center of educational research, thereby “making race visible” (McNair 2008c, 200). Maintaining a fundamental belief of CRT, I assert that questioning whose voice is being heard and silenced is essential for interpretation.

As a person of color, I recognize that race is an integral part of my identity. As a researcher, I wanted to acknowledge my positionality by being reflexive in collecting and analyzing data. Using a critical race methodology, I was able to step beyond interpretation to question and challenge the knowledge affected by the social conditions under which it is produced. Throughout the participants’ storytelling, I employed an interrelated feature of Milner’s (2007) framework: Researching the self in relation to others. In this feature, I invited the participants to reflect on self especially regarding the people and communities involved in the study. I effectively engaged in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation process using these methodological approaches.

**Data Collection**

As the researcher, I allowed participants to determine their comfortability level of meeting in person or via an online platform (video and audio). As an educator within the same setting, I was aware of the multitude of new policies and protocols that were in place for the participants and believed it was essential to ensure they felt a decreased level of stress while engaging in the research. While the in-depth interviews were conducted outside of the participant’s contracted hours, allowing the participants to be
within the setting that made them the most comfortable helped me cultivate a trusting relationship with each of them.

Each participant engaged in an oral history meeting and a total of three interviews, each averaging 45 minutes per meeting. As presented in the previous chapter, narrative data focuses on the meanings people assign to their experiences while seeking to provide insight exploring the complexity of human lives (Josselson, 2006). Each participant chose to give an oral history of themselves versus a written account. Given the global pandemic and stay-at-home orders the federal and local government set, the oral history meetings took place online using the Zoom platform. As time progressed during the data collection phase, stay-at-home orders for the pandemic were lifted, allowing participants to decide if their interviews would be held in person using social distancing safety measures. Based on schedules and personal obligations, one participant engaged in all interviews via Zoom as a personal choice. Another participant chose to conduct all interviews in person, and the final participant requested a combination of both (in-person and online). All in-person interviews were conducted at the research site, Bailey Crown Elementary, and were audio and visually recorded.

Giving participants the flexibility to choose how they engaged in their narratives provided a level of shared ownership with the research and helped develop trust amongst myself and the participant. To continuously build on that trust, I made sure that I began every interview thanking the participant for their time and acknowledged that they were to engage in the process to their comfort level, understanding that we would discuss their thoughts and feelings. In addition, throughout the interviews, I honored the emotions expressed by each participant, especially when experiences showed noticeable
uneasiness. I focused on their body language and voice intonations and allowed wait time to increase their ability to express themselves without interruption. All of the abovementioned actions relaxed the environment with each participant and fostered a calm setting to support their ability to communicate openly and effectively.

**Data Analysis Process**

After collecting the data, I engaged in transcribing the in-depth interviews. Each participant was provided a copy of the transcriptions to ensure the validity of the transcript. Researchers argue that sharing information with interviewees helps validate the data or findings (Page et al., 2000). Providing the transcription to participants was especially important because it offered comfort towards the sensitive information provided by the participants while ensuring they were given a voice in the way in which their ideas were expressed.

The transcribed documents were then printed as hard copies to begin coding. The files were divided according to the participants. I immersed myself into the data engaging in multiple reads of the transcripts. The purpose of immersing oneself is to get an overall sense of the information and become familiar with the ideas and views being expressed (Efron & Ravid, 2013). I reviewed the participants’ transcripts for repeated or phased words differently yet having the same meaning. I then placed all those words on chart paper and began to make code. Through spending a significant amount of time with the transcripts, focused on reading, rereading, and coding, I was able to identify the emerging categories using codes to help make sense of the information. Next, I created a concept map to help discover trends throughout the coded patterns. The concept map helped to expose the significant patterns and trends. Finally, to ensure the categories were accurate,
I located direct quotes, phrases, and statements made by the participants that exemplified those categories. This intricate sequence of events helped make meaning of patterns present in the data based on the unique participants.

This analysis is structured in relation to the interview guide questions. The first section allows the reader to have a close-up view and insight into each participant’s upbringing. Thus, allowing the reader to know and learn their backgrounds as a starting point for fostering their values and beliefs. Following the descriptions of each participant, the foundation of their motivations to become an educator are discussed. This journey shows the merging of each participant’s values in partnership with building a new identity (professional career). Next is the analysis discussion based on the participant’s perceptions as they relate to issues of race and culture, providing their lived experiences as the basis for formulating their perceptions. In the final section of this chapter, I present a document analysis. The final analysis shares the vision of the research site and school district while offering the participants' perceptions in correlation to the documents.

Description of Participants

This research included a total of three participants. The participants were determined using convenience sampling based on their willingness to participate in the research project. Each participant met the following characteristics:

- full-time employed certified educator holding a valid teaching license
- more than three years of teaching experience in public school settings servicing a diverse student population (as determined by state reporting school demographic categories)
- willingness to articulate personal understanding as it relates to the topic of racial and cultural competence of educators
- more than one-year teaching at the selected research site
- diversity in racial and cultural self-identification

Rick. Participant one is known within this research as Rick. Rick is a 44-year-old male who racially identifies himself as White and culturally as Scottish English. He is approximately 6’1 in height, slim build, wears a full-faced beard and glasses. I would describe him as an introverted intellectual who exhibits a calm and relaxing aura.

According to Rick, both of his parents were educators within his tiny rural town. When he described the geographical area he was raised in, he laughed vigorously, highlighting how small the population was compared to the research site. Rick emphasized that his hometown is where nobody ever leaves, one of those communities where people grow up, go off for school, and return after retiring. Yet, Rick added that he has lived and taught in multiple geographical locations within the United States and South America throughout his career as an educator. He stated that his travel was a way to see things and experience different cultures and people. He felt that the need for travel was cultivated by his parents and their dedication to taking their children to explore other places every summer. Based on his reflections, those opportunities were due to the eagerness of his parents. Their goal was to expose their children to what was out there (in the world outside their community). Rick has taught multiple grade levels strictly at the elementary level in public and private school settings.
Rick described his younger self as average when it relates to education. However, he highlighted the support of his mother and father for setting the expectation of keeping education first.

My parents were both teachers in the town I grew up in, and it was small, so I had a lot of freedom. Basically, I just ran around outside, rode our bikes wherever we went, and basically, we grew up outdoors. In high school, my dad was my principal, which was interesting, and my mother was the librarian at the high school. So that could be a really bad thing depending on how you look at it. Luckily, I got along with everybody pretty well, and I didn’t have issues with that. Everyone was pretty cool to me, and I was pretty cool to everybody else; I mean, it was a graduating class of 75 people.

Despite their best efforts, Rick remembered how he struggled in the content area of math. Through diligent tutoring from his dad, he was always able to maintain his grades in math courses. Surprisingly, Rick has spent the majority of his career as an educator teaching math and science. Rick’s childhood upbringing has helped establish a value of education for which he has demonstrated success academically by obtaining graduate-level degrees. I shared his instinctual feelings to pursue education continuously. It seems that learning was also a way for Rick to explore the world and experience other cultures beyond those in his hometown.

Sandra. Participant two is known within this research as Sandra. She is a 33-year-old woman who is short stature, standing at 4’9 in height with a personality full of energy and positivity. Sandra racially identifies herself as Alaskan Native American and culturally as Native American. She takes pride in her long blonde hair and dresses
fashionably, ensuring matching accessories with every outfit. I would describe Sandra as a resilient and optimistic young lady.

If I can smile at somebody or say something nice to them and let them change their attitude for 30 minutes to pour that into somebody else, that’s like kind of my goal daily. I try just to spread love and happiness because I don’t think we get it enough.

According to Sandra, her biological parents were high school sweethearts who divorced when she was two years old due to her father revealing his sexual preference for men. This revealing information began her constant uprooting living situation with multiple family members. In her opinion, Sandra believed that the value of education varied depending on who her caretaker was. Sandra stated that her biological mom struggled in school and never provided structure and encouragement for her daughter’s academic career. Once her mother remarried, she highlighted that her stepfather reviewed words and showed her strategies that helped Sandra become an independent learner. As a result, it built confidence within her for the academic journey in school. On the other hand, her father was an educator. While she couldn’t recall any direct support or encouragement related to school when she lived with him, she vividly recounted the importance of reading books and multiple visits to the library.

While Sandra experienced inconsistency in her living situations, her school life was a stark contrast. Sandra shifted upright in her seat and smiled with joy when she described her story as a student before becoming an educator. During her narration of herself as a student, Sandra repeated the word consistent four times and explained her relationships with educators as nurturing, predictable, connected, and comfortable. She
mentioned that she had always experienced a positive encounter with schooling no matter the geographical area she relocated to. At that moment, I felt the rays of excitement that exuberated from her. I also connected with that feeling toward school from my childhood. It was as if I could picture myself in her memories, and I immediately became more curious about her perceptions of the topics that were to come. While she had multiple caregivers, Sandra explained that the most memorable childhood moments occurred when she lived with her cousin, known to her as her aunt.

Sandra’s aunt was a teacher during the time she lived with her. Sandra recalled being registered for school and the district explaining to her aunt that she would be required to repeat the grade level due to her previous schools’ grades and academic calendar. It was during this time that Sandra said someone fought for her. Sandra’s aunt explained to the school that she would be responsible for academically supporting Sandra in remediating the skills she lacked and would work diligently with her to close the gaps. According to Sandra, her aunt’s strategies and actions instilled the value of education within her.

Denise. The third participant is known within this research as Denise. Her caramel skin glows to perfection while standing 6’2 with pearly white teeth showing amongst her radiant smile. Denise identifies herself racially as Black and culturally as Trinidadian. I would describe her as compassionate and outgoing. Denise has spent her career as an educator within Texas and for some time in Germany. Denise detailed how her family emigrated from Trinidad to Brooklyn, where most of her community consisted of individuals predominantly of Western Caribbean descent. Her father completed his post-secondary degree in Trinidad, while her mother received her degree in nursing once
they came to the United States. Given her parents’ upbringing and dedication to change their children’s lives, they believed that education should be placed first in your life, and everything else could wait. She confirmed this in her remarks when asked about the values her family had concerning education:

When you come from the islands and come here, it’s like you have to take advantage of the opportunity you have, especially with education. So, it should not be wasted, and so when you have parents who sacrifice for their family or whatever, you feel like you need to live up to their expectations. And it’s not that you don’t feel the pressure to do that; you want to do that for them because you know that they busted [their] behind for you, and if that’s what they want from you, then that shouldn’t be hard to give them.

Given her family values, Denise took education seriously and recalled never spending her free time doing much else but learning. However, once she began the journey of becoming an educator, her world of learning went beyond the world she had known of outside of her tight-knit community in Brooklyn, New York.

**Analysis of Interviews**

The descriptions of these participants help to give a small insight into who they are. However, the data collected from each semi-structured interview allowed them to construct the narratives of their lived experiences. Through their interviews, they were able to express their perceptions while reflecting on their journey as educators. In the next section of this chapter, I will synthesize the data captured from all three participants through categories aligned to the interview guide. Each participant was asked the same series of questions yet spoke openly about themselves, describing how the topics
presented were apparent in their lives. Each section that follows will interweave the three participants’ stories while also providing in-depth recounts of their lived experience stories.

The **Inspiration** section narrates the stories of the journey to decide to teach will provide the entry into their lives at the onset of the careers. **Teacher Preparation** will highlight the shared perceptions of the teacher programs each participant encountered to become certified as an educator. Within the section titled **Relationships build Academic Success**, the educators express their perspective on the values they hold for their classroom practice. Following, **Race and Culture** analyze the perceptions and insights conveyed throughout the interview process related to multiple topics and issues aligned in subcategories.

**Inspiration**

Each participant experienced unique journeys into their roles as an educator. Their journeys are derived from different geographical locations, family structures, and fundamental values. Each participant recounted experiences of having the opportunity to work with children. These opportunities would ultimately catapult them into choosing teaching as a career. However, through each of their interviews, they indicated their teacher preparation programs were unsuccessful in helping them understand the responsibilities of their career as an educator. This was a significant finding present within each of the participants' first interviews as they shared their lived experiences of becoming an educator.

When Rick described his influences on becoming an educator, he acknowledged his parents. “My parents, both being teachers, influenced it (his decision) to a point. Just
kind of that education was a priority. I saw how they lived their lives, interacted with young people, and became role models to their students.” While this was just his initial recall, Rick continued the conversation by pointing to a significant event of working with elementary-aged students in his senior year of high school. This experience amazed him at how the teacher managed the children and how the students reacted to her. While Rick envisioned the events that occurred that school year, there was a smile on his face as if he was back in the classroom working with the kids. “When she let me work with them (the students), I was like, wow, these kids are pretty cool. I was scared at first, and then the kids started to know I was in sports, and they would make signs for me and make stuff for me, and it was like, wow, that’s pretty cool.” After this experience, Rick decided that he would become a teacher. Unlike the other two participants, Rick decided to become an educator and entered undergraduate, destined to become an educator from the beginning.

On the other hand, both Sandra and Denise did not initially choose education as their career focus. Sandra described wanting to help others and considering the field of nursing upon attending college. In contrast, Denise told growing up and always sharing the dream of being a surgeon with her family. Surprisingly, both Denise and Sandra explained that what detoured them from continuing pathways in the medical field was their inability to handle the emotions that could arise with the possibility of death with patients.

Sandra stated she spent three years studying nursing in college before she changed her major to education. In a melancholy voice with her head down, she narrated the moments she had to weigh her options for a significant change in school. “I tried to come back and do radiology because I was thinking in my head, maybe I wouldn’t have to deal
with so much trauma, but it was the same kind of trauma. When I decided I was settling with ideas on what I wanted to do and get started, I thought about my mom, dad, and aunt. My aunt and my dad always worked in like a very underprivileged part.” While speaking, Sandra begins to sit up straight look directly at me as if she was experiencing rejuvenation, remembering why she decided to choose her teacher preparation program. She continued to explain to me choosing education as a career didn’t seem as if it would be acceptable amongst her family.

   Here’s like a big secret too, I always wanted to be a teacher, but the one time that I expressed openly this desire, my mom told me, don’t do that; your dad’s going to get off to the idea that you wouldn’t be just like him. So, I had always wanted to be a teacher, and I’ve never told my mom that she persuaded my vision and put me in such a school for an extra three years of something I really didn’t want to do. To find out it wasn’t for me in the first place, so it kind of set and stayed in my brain for many years until I decided, like, this is what I’m gonna do because this is what I always wanted to do.

Once she changed her major to education, Sandra became involved in an internship program that allowed her to observe in a classroom. That experience and connection with the classroom teacher helped her to believe in herself to choose the career she always wanted.

   Denise shared a similar experience to both Rick and Sandra related to becoming involved with students to spark interest leading to becoming an educator. However, due to the pressure of definitively choosing an educator’s career, she struggled immensely.
She reflected on the experience of having to make decisions about her academic journey in college.

My job in college was working at a head start, and I just loved it. I was like, I think I want to do this, but it was already kind of late in my college to switch majors because I would have had to stay in school way longer, so I was like, let me just get my degree in psychology since I’ve already taken a lot of psychology class and then I would pursue it after. Then I started working in programs that involved working with youth and summer camps.

Denise continues to share with me how her involvement with children remained consistent with her jobs after college. While also in her community, she heard stories of older students engaging in fights with their teachers. Those stories made her realize that working with older children at the high school level wasn’t an option. She explains that she was drawn to elementary-aged children based on their ability to be impressionable. She believes that this provides the ability for adults to support that child to become a better person. Her continued encounters with children helped foster her joy of working with children. This encounter ultimately made her decide to enroll in a teacher preparation program.

Teacher Preparation Programs

Notwithstanding their unique paths to the field of education, each participant has spent their career focused on educating children. Collectively, they shared similar experiences once leaving their teacher preparation programs. Sandra and Rick considered the teacher preparation programs they attended to be deemed traditional routes into the career. In contrast, Denise completed an alternative certification program offered for
individuals who possessed their Bachelor’s degree in another field of study. During the interviews, each was asked to reflect on their teacher preparation program. Specifically, they were asked to tell about the most memorable experience that helped them understand the teaching career’s responsibilities. Their reflections included statements that were filled with commonalities:

Denise stated:

   The courses like it didn’t you the experience you needed going into it…. It gives you the surface-level things you need to know, kind of, but you really don’t know what you are getting into the classroom, then you know what it is to be a teacher. It gave me some knowledge and ideas, but I would not necessarily say that it prepared me to be a teacher.

Rick summarized his experience by stating, “It’s like you have this idealistic view of it, but going through school, you realize, okay, this is a lot more complex than maybe I originally thought.” While Sandra admitted, “I don’t know if it was as much coursework honestly as it was my professors…it was never necessarily the tailored coursework.”

   In reviewing these comments, I realized that the three participants expressed that it was never the teaching program they attended that provided them with an understanding of the career and responsibilities of becoming educators. It was first the moments they spent with the professors who had experience teaching children. In addition, it was when each of them became a teacher of record and stood in front of children. These two pivotal moments helped turn their theoretical knowledge of being an educator into a more realistic view. When asked to share an experience with coursework,
both Sandra and Denise couldn’t recall any specific coursework from their teacher training programs. However, Rick recollected

I had to take this early childhood development class. It’s pretty eye-opening when you think about just the different stages and the development that these kids go through and what you’re responsible for as far as noticing the characteristics of different age groups. Then that’s when I actually started going into classrooms and seeing like, Oh, this was at the university.

In Rick’s recalling, it was clear that while he was first introduced to theory in his coursework, the experience with actual children made the knowledge more realistic. Each participant stated that their programs only prepared them for the theoretical of their career, yet it failed to give them a real understanding that provided practice. They all believed that to understand a teaching career, you had to experience it. While each discussed engaging in observational hours that required them to train within a school before becoming certified, they didn’t identify this experience as being “prepared.”

While I wholly agreed with the participates on their views on theory versus practice, I didn’t understand why their teacher training programs had not combined both more thoroughly. I attended a traditional teacher preparation program that I can attest successfully prepared educators to understand the roles and responsibilities of becoming teachers. This successful preparation was similarly based on what Sandra discussed as the hard work behind the coursework load. All the professors within my elementary education teacher preparation program had previously taught elementary-aged children. In addition to providing a theory that founded the profession, they also offered their lived experiences to help us comprehend the theoretical principles.
Moreover, while simultaneously learning in the classroom, I was also responsible for field observations. These field observations required a mentor teacher to model the best strategies for delivering instruction. After weeks of observing and discussing my wonderings, I was placed at the front of the classroom to provide direct instruction to the classroom students. Following my implementation of instruction, both my mentor teacher and campus professor gave me feedback.

This experience occurred for each core content class in the program. I believe the repetitive opportunities that I had to take theory into practice while being encouraged to reflect on the experience helped prepare me significantly for becoming a teacher of record. Such experiences improved my preparedness for becoming an educator.

**Academic Success**

Educators are tasked with increasing students’ ability to read, write, and do basic mathematics. Each participant has spent their journey as educators attempting to achieve this goal. The discussion of academic success is imperative to this research as it helps to understand the core values that unconsciously support the daily decision-making of a classroom educator. In their ability to articulate their definition for academic success involves, each included their words *individual* and *growth*. These words were wrapped throughout their responses and helped show their perceptions compared to the expectations they were tasked with.

Sandra led with explaining her definition for academic success based on the expectations of the overall state mandates. She said, “I don’t think academic success is necessarily like reaching that grade-level benchmark.” She continued to detail what she means by powerfully connecting her own beliefs:
I think it is small growth along the way because all those small obstacles turn into bigger ones that you can work through easier. So, when I measure academic success, I’m looking for all the little things to highlight versus just big things.

In her description of academic success, Sandra highlights the individualistic journey that a student should take to help them accomplish broader expectations of their academic career. While providing her definition, she reenacts to me examples that she has encountered in her classroom practice. Her eyes and smile widen during her reenactment, emphasizing her genuine excitement for her students’ academic success. She turns her head and grasps her chest, “Wow, you grew a reading level that’s a big thing. Did you see how you tackled that word?”.

Her dramatic performance is also exemplified in words expressed by Rick. He notes that academic success is a journey solely tracked by each student. Rick explains,

It’s all relative to the true level that a student is on. It’s the progress made by a student throughout the school year based on where the student started. It’s based on each student’s potential and the amount of progress that they make throughout the year.

In conversation with Denise, she also expressed similar thinking as the other two participants related to defining academic success. She tells me, “Academic success with the kids is just able to show growth, from where they are…As long as you can show me that you’re growing, you’re improving in areas that are an academic success”.

With the federal mandate of ESSA, States have placed student academic progress at the core of accountability systems. States are required to address academic proficiency, and students’ growth (or progress) are given more weight in how schools are assessed.
within these accountability systems (Data Quality Campaign, 2019). In the research site’s state, student achievement accounts for 70% to establish accountability ratings. Ratings are ranged in A through F. Based on the state’s school accountability system, in the area of achievement (or progress), the research site has received a C and was deemed by the school district as a “targeted campus for improvement.” I was not surprised that none of the participants mentioned the school accountability system in their response to academic success. In addition, none of them included growth according to the standardized testing as a measurement for the growth and progress of students’ academic success. Yet, in reality, testing and accountability systems are used daily in their careers to assess and measure their ability to educate children.

**Relationships Build Academic Success**

Each participant was able to explain the process for which they approach building relationships with their students. One word that repeated within all of their responses was the word “connections.” Each participant finds their way of connecting with their students to help foster a relationship. Another aspect participants spoke of within their interview responses focused on the importance of a warm environment for their classroom. They all believed this component of relationship-building resulted from how one’s classroom felt physically and emotionally.

Denise acknowledged this sentiment in her response: “that warm, nurturing attitude toward students and just show them that I care, that helps to build relationships with my students.” Denise giggled as she described the primary strategy she uses to build relationships with students. She explained how she uses her love of music to make
connections. With pop culture music, she notices what they like. She continued to describe how she does this,

If I hear kids humming stuff for whatever you know, I’ll joke with them like now is not the time for Cardi B, Cardi B is not in my class. They look at me like, Oh, you know what I’m talking about, or Tic-Tok dance or something like you know just that them seeing like I’m a person outside who knows about things outside of being a teacher. Then they think like, oh yeah, she’s cool.

Denise continues to elaborate in her response focused on using strategies like this to allow kids to open up and connect with her.

Sandra also described connections as she highlighted her ability to communicate and help others navigate information effectively. Sandra believes that her ability to be genuine gives her a level of contact with her students and families that naturally fosters relationship building. In this way, she feels like she is giving back to the world. She reported, “Just talk to them like a person. When we’re working with somebody this little, we forget that they’re little people, not like babies. They can rise to anything that you put before them.” As she details how she engages with younger students, her motions include grabbing her heart while telling how much she enjoys talking with her students. “I don’t think they’re actually listened to, so I try to really like to hang on to every word so I can connect it back to them or their learning at some point.”

Another way of connecting for each participant involved sharing a component of their lives that they believed helped inspire. Rick emphasizes that his childhood experiences with math are one known fact that he ensures to share with his struggling learners. He stated that allowing them to understand helps them see that he has high
expectations and believes that if he can get past the struggle and become a math teacher, they can. Rick shares,

> It’s not my intent to embarrass them in what we’re doing in class, we can have a nice friendly conversation, but business is business, and just giving them the opportunity to come to me. I don’t want my students to be scared of me; I want them to respect me enough to know that they can come to me, and then I’m going to treat them fairly and consistently.

He emphasizes the same point that Denise and Sandra highlighted, “when they feel comfortable, and they feel safe, they’re energetic.”

For Denise, connection with students is sometimes focused on sharing similar socio-economic statuses as her students in her younger years. She exemplified this when she states: “No matter where they come from with certain backgrounds, I can relate. It might be a little different, but they know that I’m like a second momma and just like their momma, I’m not gonna play.”

Similarly, Sandra uses her experiences with her aunt. Sandra incorporates a relentless love of reading and engaged learning strategies with her students in her classroom. Given her lived experiences, Sandra connects with her students who are deemed underserved. She recalls times of living with her father in invested motels yet having the stability of school and educators to give her comfort and hope. Sandra and Denise both believe that their lived experiences with being from a lower socio-economic status as a child provide a sense of understanding for the children they serve.

Each participant valued building relationships with students as an impactful and necessary component to the career’s success to build academic growth. They all
highlighted that it was an ongoing process throughout the school year. Some even reference the benefits of using those relationships later for family and community connections with future students. Relationship building seems to be a core value that these participants understand helps to support their students daily. However, it is not all that must be contemplated in a setting that considers children’s racial and cultural background in pursuing academic achievement.

**Race and Culture Analysis**

The previous section of the initial interview data analysis laid a foundational background of the participants within this research. This background was a part of the first interview and helped establish a pathway of how each participant’s perceptions and insights were fostered. In the continued analysis, participants were asked specific questions related to race and culture. As presented in the interview guide, the discussed questions asked participants to focus on their own racial and cultural identity linked to building relationships, practice as an educator, and academic success. Two major themes emerged:

1. **Early Experiences** introduces the reflections and experiences of each participant as it relates to race and culture within formal and informal settings

2. **Making a Definition** explores the participant’s perceptions to define the term racial and cultural competence related to the previous sections within the interview analysis.

**Early Experiences**

In the first interview, participants were asked to share their experience with professional training or coursework focused on race and culture. Each participant had a
different response that gave insight to their level of awareness in a formal setting focused
directly on race and culture. Rick stated, “nothing I can recall.” He pondered for a
significant amount of time with a look of confusion on his face. While he could not
explicitly remember an experience along his academic and professional journey, he has
had the opportunity to explore what he referred to as different educational settings. In the
recalling of his professional career, he did explain:

I went from a private school doing self-contained second grade, that was my
student teaching setting in Venezuela. Whereas when I was in Colorado, a rural
high school, I was doing ESL (English as a Second Language). The kids are much
different in Colorado. A lot of them were the children of migrant workers, so it
was a different demographic and I didn’t know how to teach myself. The only
reason they hired me was because I could speak Spanish.

Rick identified the stark differences in the educational settings at the beginning of his
career as a teacher. While he didn’t spend any of his mentions on what made the students
different from their specific race and culture, his recall presented itself based on those
issues. He compared his student’s geographical locations, languages, and ages. Without
prompting, he continued to reflect:

The majority of the students at the private school were a lot of Expats, so they’re
the children of people who are there working for the oil companies. So, there was
students from many different countries. The Venezuelans that went to that school
were children of very wealthy families because it was a very expensive school.
They wanted their children to learn English and be educated in English with the
hopes that they would attend universities in the United States at some point.
In this reflection, Rick focused on the socio-economic status of his students’ parents. In addition, he highlights the diversity of their home countries. From his perspective, the wealthier Venezuelans were able to have access to the opportunity of exposing their children to a language that would help them cross-cultural barriers. Learning the language of English would allow the Venezuelan children to handle the power imbalances as referenced in the definition of racial and cultural competence used for this work (Obidah & Teel, 2008). Rick never explained anything specifically related to the racial backgrounds of his students. While he has not had any formal training or courses in race and culture, Rick was able to speak to the differences related to the socio-economic status and geographical location that were more apparent to him. In his reflection, his mentioning of the various origin countries of the students and parents provides insight into the culture.

Like Rick, Denise had no training or coursework in her alternative certification program focused on race and culture. However, she did recall being enrolled in an African art class but stated it wasn’t “looking back or giving me anything about culture.” At that exact moment, she explained how she felt limited in her options when choosing her college. Unprompted, her example was focused on knowing the differences of schools:

I had heard of HBCU’s (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) and stuff but never visited them. I kind of wish that I was able to experience going there. I was never pushed to take those kinds of courses. I hadn’t really thought about it taking more race and culture courses, just probably because I felt like I had
diverse knowledge of things, so I didn’t really need to pursue more, but then you can always pursue more, and I do that now as an adult.

In her response, Denise seemed to question herself as it related to exposure to the topic of race and culture versus being engrossed in a setting that embodied it. I then prompted Denise to clarify why she mentioned HBCU’s. She commented that her undergraduate college was noted as a PWI (Privately White Institution). This follow-up clarification led her to recount her experience:

I went there for the scholarship, and they touted themselves as a diverse school. So, when I went to visit for the little summer orientation, it was a group of mixed folks, and you don’t really get the big picture until school actually starts, and then you’re seeing like oh by diversity, they meant European diversity, not diversity on the whole. So, it was one of those things where the brown folks were all really part of each other’s clubs. Latinos, you need us, the African American community, the Caribbean American community, we all would attend each other’s meetings because that population was so small. I was really disappointed in how they promoted themselves being so diverse when really their idea of diversity wasn’t my idea of diversity.

I inquired with Denise to further explain to help me clarify her meaning of diversity. It seemed this lived experience brought multiple levels of understanding for her, and I wanted to explore it. She recounted:

The brown population was tiny, and that included everybody Black Americans, Latino and Hispanic people just brown. All of us were just this one little section, and everything else was pretty much White. Then, you had the Asian and a
handful of Indian people, but it wasn’t really like diverse. Like when I think of diversity and growing up in Brooklyn, even though my neighborhood or community was predominantly West Indian in New York you see everything. Everybody from everywhere and so that’s kind of what I was expecting. It’s not more this than that, but wherever you go, and you ride the train, you see everything every walk of life right, so that was my understanding of diversity. Diversity means a mixture of Brown, White, Black but a good amount of each one not predominantly something else. So, I was just a little disappointed in that when I when I realized what it was.

Denise was able to be explicit about why she was disappointed in the environment of the college, deeming it as lacking diversity. In addition, she used her upbringing and experiences with race and culture to ground her understanding. While Denise had no formal training and coursework focused on race and culture, she was aware of it within every aspect of life. Before being asked about race and culture training, she repeatedly highlighted the race of individuals she had encountered in her life. In the narration of her upbringing, she consistently described individuals by highlighting their race. Specifically, Denise spoke to the strong emotions that still resonated with her based on her experiences with those individuals. When asked if she could reflect on repeatedly mentioning the race of individuals based on her interactions and the provoked feelings, she described a specific encounter that occurred during her first year of teaching.

For some of them I was just less black than what they were, so you know they treated me a little bit differently. It was funny because there were a lot of Black teachers there, and I don’t know if it was because I was new and they didn’t
expect anybody to speak up, but that ended up in a meeting with the union and my
Black principal basically was saying that I don’t know how to teach Black kids. I
left after that evening. I felt like she was being racist against me because of my
last name and because I’m Caribbean. She must’ve thought I didn’t understand
the American Black experience or I don’t know how to relate to these kids like
I’m less Black.

Denise shifted in her chair and slowly began to scrunch her face showing emotional
transformation as if she was back in that moment. It was evident that Denise had
encountered an experience that made her uncomfortable and questioned her racial
identity as a Black woman. The hurt seemed to be intensified because the person in
power causing these painful feelings was her superior, who also identified as a Black
woman. It was apparent that while Denise had not received formal training in race and
culture, she had much-lived experience with making sense of how she fits in the world
based on her own racial and cultural identity.

In the same way, the other participants denied formal training or coursework in
the topics of race and culture, Sandra concurred. However, whereas Denise attended a
PWI, Sandra attended college at an HBCU. It is important to note that HBCU’s were
established to serve the educational needs of Black Americans due to the frequent denial
of admission to traditionally White institutions (US Department of Education, 1991). Due
to this, Sandra highlighted that race and culture for her showed up in the representation of
professors. Sandra recounted being in college and having a professor who was “damn
near 100 years old and was teaching”, she joked.
She was still up there teaching and telling us stories about her education and overcoming certain things and playing that into how she taught us as educators to be responsive and understanding. Another one of my professors, a much elderly professor, was like the head of the education department. She still put her time into the students on campus by teaching classes every day multiple times a day. How many times have you seen the head of the education department teaching courses and multiples at that? She was being an advisor to you and still having her door open. Both of them lived through the whole Martin Luther King era. Those experiences made me more empathetic and more aware that I think most people would have been given.

While it was the specific question that provoked this recount, Sandra began giving an account of her experiences with race and culture during her upbringing early on in her interview. Specifically, she described what life was like for her growing up and why choosing an HBCU for college was acceptable.

I kind of grew up seeing diversity and culture through my aunt and my dad because the town that I was being raised in Oklahoma literally like the bus would pull up to your front door. That’s how small it was. There were no bus stops and so there wasn’t a lot of diversity or culture going on. Growing up seeing it through education with my dad and my aunt and going to their classroom and seeing things like that, then moving, I was also like very exposed. Because nothing ill towards my mother but she’s very very White like Polish White and she notices things in ways that I don’t notice them, that’s all I’m gonna say in a respectful way. No matter what, we’re just different people in that way, and I just
never had that viewpoint growing up, and I’ve never thought that way, and when I was thinking about what colleges should I go to, I kind of knew like where my calling was and what I wanted to do. I could have just easily gone to U of H (a PWI) if that’s what I wanted, but it’s just not where I was wanting to deliver myself. In the very beginning, it was funny. I made some of the most interesting friends because they would literally like make fun of me because I was White, but I was that White girl with the asymmetrical bob on campus, but it’s so funny I ended up having like a really good time there and made everlasting friends and learned a depth of knowledge like being culturally responsive.

During her narration, Sandra held an enormous smile on her face and laughed as she envisioned being back at her HBCU. It was evident that college had a significant impact on her development of becoming an educator. Her feeling of acceptance and love from her peers was comforting, despite being considered a White girl. The onset of this recount pushed Sandra into deep reflection even after her interview was over.

At the beginning of her second interview, Sandra admitted that she began to ponder more about her upbringing after interview one. Specifically, she stated that she wanted to understand the historical lineage of her family from the perspective of their cultural and racial identity. This experience led her to determine why she believed she shared opposing viewpoints with her mother. She began to fidget with her hair and speak in a lower tone while stating, “this is such a sensitive topic. Are you sure you’re ready for this?” I reassured her that while I would handle whatever she mentioned, my biggest concern was maintaining her emotional and mental state. I continued to explain that her
ability to share her thoughts aloud to me in the interview was a safe space. She breathed in deeply and began to speak:

Most recent events like George Floyd, like our viewpoints, are different in the fact that I don’t think it was right no matter what, and it’s I guess we’re talking about like not being memorialized but being remembered. When I think of the memory, I think of the suppression, and everything that’s going on that is profiling and that this is another instance of where this is wrong, and this is happening with the memory of it all whereas. In her mind when she remembers it as people idolizing a man who was a convicted felon who had done robbery in his previous years and not like the journey of life that he was in at that moment in time when all that was happening. So it’s like again, I feel the media can also be the blame for the way people perceive things because what you choose to listen to and what you choose to watch can heavily sway how you view things. I think just watching those different news outlets or maybe thinking that instead of it being a negative experience like why are they still talking about that because it doesn’t matter that he was a convicted felon and that’s not how I like view or speak about the situation.

Sandra sputtered when presenting the comparison of opinion. After I asked her how she was feeling to ensure her emotional and mental well-being were prioritized. Sandra stated, “I’m feeling okay I feel bad because I don’t want my mom to think I’m talking about her, but she knows we’re just different, and I tell her that all the time.” During this interview segment, Sandra was on zoom at her home, and her mom was near the room she sat in alone. As we continued the interview, Sandra concluded by saying, “I just think
it’s knowledge and experience.” I affirmed and applauded her bravery and transparency in sharing her own experiences and perceptions during the interview. Sandra communicated a difficult moment, but she helped exhibit how race and culture impacted her daily life.

During the first interview, race and culture were presented to the participants considering their engagement with the terms in a formal setting. Each participant denied being trained or taking a course in their teacher preparation programs focused on the topics. However, each participant was able to highlight lived experiences that were directly connected to the issues. As the interviews continued the participants focused on race and culture in their careers as an educator. Within these thoughtful discussions, participants were able to consider build from their definition of racial and cultural competence while contemplating the aspects of their practice.

**Making a Definition**

In the second interview, participants were asked to define the term racial and cultural competence related to the role of an educator. For this research, racial and cultural competence is a teacher’s awareness of power imbalances in classrooms concerning differences in race (their own and others) and culture. Each participant based their definitions on examples that helped them visualize the term in action for an educator. In addition, the participants shared an understanding of the word “awareness” in their definitions of the term. As their second interview continued, participants were asked to focus on their racial and cultural identity related to building relationships, practice as an educator, and academic success. This interview allowed participants to share their perceptions while also reflecting on their daily practice in the classroom.
Given the variations in their lived experiences, each participant focused on their current and past realities through the interview.

Rick began his interview working to define the term racial and cultural competence. In his definition, Rick repeated the word *understand* more than four times. He articulated the foundation for his definition using this explanation:

It is understanding and acknowledging that we are diverse and that we do come from different places. We do come from different backgrounds and different cultures, and respecting that fact. Not treating everyone the same. Not trying to put every student in the same basket but rather understanding that just as I come from a certain place and I want you to know I’m gonna try and help you to understand where I come from and I want you to help me understand where you come from. The more I can understand that, the more I’m going to be able to use that to the overall benefit of the class. Just respecting culture and having the initiative to learn about other people’s cultures and backgrounds. Then utilizing that as a strength through your teaching in any way that you can.

In his definition of the term, Rick highlighted that an individual must be able to take the initiative to learn more about their students’ culture and background. He also emphasized that understanding was at the basis of being racially and culturally competent. Rick stated that being racially and culturally competent required a back and forth interaction between the educator and the students. As he continued to speak, he shared his thoughts as to how racial and cultural competence could be displayed in practice:

From the perspective of math and science, I think there’s always been kind of a train of thought that girls, in particular girls of color, can’t excel in science and
technology. There’s kind of been that perception, and I think part of my job is recognizing our differences in our cultures and just to open their (students) world. I try to give students of all backgrounds, and all colors while I expose them to the fact that you can! It’s possible for everybody, you can learn to go as far just as he (a boy) can learn. I don’t specifically in my classroom integrate cultural focused lessons, but at the same time, I try to draw from lots of different places so that students see that there are astronauts who are black, mathematicians, professors, doctors, lawyers, engineers, whatever you want to say from all races, all backgrounds, and it is possible, but it starts here.

Rick provided an inspirational message to his students based on the stereotypes placed within his teaching content. He also mentioned that while he doesn’t introduce any lesson specifically focused on the culture, he tries to embed cultural differences into his instruction that help eradicate the stereotypes. When asked if he feels considered himself to be a racially and culturally competent educator, he explained,

I feel like I am, but I also feel like there’s probably more that I can do. There’s more that I can learn. I think about working in a different country, working with a lot of different students and parents. Working with families from different cultures and backgrounds while traveling I feel like has opened my mind a lot to different cultures and backgrounds. I think I’m in a pretty good place, and I do respect all of the diversity that we have, but it’s an ongoing process. I think it always will be.

As he continued to speak, Rick stated he doesn’t believe that his own racial and cultural identity impacts him as an educator. However, he commented that it was a prevalent issue
during the beginning of his teaching career. In his journey, Rick believed that being racially and culturally competent was an evolving process. Apart from that process consisted of building relationships with students who don’t share the same racial and cultural background as he identifies for himself. In this case, Rick commented that the goal is to always “bridge the gap between the two cultures and build the communication with parents.” He explained that being viewed as a racially competent educator can help foster trust amongst his families and allow them to communicate with him.

At first, it may have been more awkward and difficult, but it’s not because I feel like I don’t want to build a relationship with you. It’s due to, I don’t know you, I don’t know where you come from, and you don’t look like me. I want to understand you, I want to learn more about you, I want to get to know you. It can’t be just me. I know I have to do it in a way that parents are gonna want to do it too. I think that’s another thing that over the years, just because of all the experience I’ve had with different families and different students, I’ve gotten pretty good at it, but there’s always room for improvement because every year is different, but I think I’ve gotten pretty good at it.

In his explanation, Rick helped to clarify what he meant by bridging the gap between the two cultures. In his reflection, he mentioned trying to build relationships with students of different racial and cultural backgrounds. Still, he also acknowledged that it is a transactional process requiring the parent and student to achieve the goal. To help clarify his point, Rick shared a moment in his teaching career when he realized the importance of cultural understanding. During a parent conference at the private school, one of his parents highlighted Rick's comment on the student’s report card. As he transported
himself back at the moment, he narrated the scene where he was oblivious to the term and displayed a shocked face. However, he noted that he remained present in the conversation during the parent conference, allowing the parent to teach him. He learned that in English, the term is harmless. Yet, in the translation to Spanish, the term was used to provide an insult. He recalled the parent presenting this new level of awareness in a calm manner that allowed him to take in what was being taught receptively.

Situations such as the parent conference helped him to foster a new level of openness to communicating. Rick continued to build on his perspective of partnership amongst students and families as he established how being considered racially and culturally competent supports the academic success of his student population. He noted that without understanding and being open for communication, there would be a barrier placed in front of students in receiving any instruction presented. His thoughtful responses demonstrated a stark contrast to the other participants. Specifically, his ability to define racial and cultural competence seemed to come easier than Sandra and Denise.

Similar to Rick, the definition of racial and cultural competence as presented by Denise encompasses the core value of “understanding.” Denise detailed that an individual from a different race of their students must begin understanding the culture, history, and family life. She stated, “putting yourself in the shoes of somebody else” was the first step in understanding. Denise admitted this action is easier said than done, but the results help you establish much more:

You get to imagine those kinds of things and get to see like okay in this culture you know students may act like this. Or it may be that they are expected to act like this towards adults and have this kind of relationship. Racial and cultural
competence like you and as an educator, you have to have that like if you can’t
see outside your bubble, that’s a problem because we work with so many different
kinds of kids that come from all walks of life.

As she explained, Denise highlighted that one step to begin implementing competence
into practice was to seek information in different places. She mentioned pursuing ways to
help you to recognize how to open yourself to becoming aware. Ultimately, Denise
believed seeking to support others despite a difference of race, country of origin,
language, and opinion is of utmost importance. Given her upbringing, Denise stated this
was the mindset necessary when implementing racial and cultural competence in the
classroom. Her childhood helped her to form these beliefs:

I grew up able to experience a good education and have teachers that were really
interested in making sure that I reached my fullest potential. It didn’t matter that I
was black or brown or however they saw me. It didn’t matter my name or
anything like that. I’m super hard on black kids just because I know that we got to
work many times as hard as other folks to get where we need to be. We already
have so many things against us. I treat all of my kids equally but then those kids
(Black kids) I feel like I need to do something a little bit more for them because
I’m thinking how things are. want to make a difference for all my students, and it
doesn’t matter where they come from. I just want them to be successful. But
knowing what I know, I just push the Black kids a little bit more.

Denise spoke with passion during this segment of her interview. She felt as though in her
career as an educator, she was called to support the needs of Black students. This call to
action has no harmful intentions of her students from other racial backgrounds. As she
continued to speak, she detailed the inequalities and injustices that she has witnessed in the world against Black people. Those experiences help to increase her advocacy for the children of the culture. She also stressed classroom experiences where teachers set no expectations for Black students allowing them to lack academic support. Denise believes it is not kids who make a school “bad” yet the lack of support from adults that help a school to fail academically. Schools’ need to improve requires “adults to find it within themselves to build those relationships with these kids to make a difference.”

When asked about the experience of building relationships with students who do not share the same racial and cultural background as her, Denise insisted that the connections look different, but she has no issues. As with her Black students, she tries to approach all students through her favorite outlet: music. She described that some students enjoy a range of music, similar to her, and for those who don’t want music, she pushes to share other things she enjoys to connect with the child. Denise stated it is the ability to find a kid’s interest and connecting with it that helps to build relationships beyond race and culture. In her experience as a teacher, she noticed more White teachers struggling to develop relationships with Black students versus her observation with the relationships of Hispanic teachers and Black students. This conflict she narrated is due to adults holding assumptions about the children and their family's lives instead of getting to know them. In some instances, Denise has had to support teachers in identifying their different treatment of students based on their race. In her efforts to provide constructive feedback to the teacher, she states that she makes all attempts to leave race out of the discussion even though “it’s like subconscious source or subliminally there.” Her reason for this is that she doesn’t want to offend someone and make them think she is calling them racist.
before they can hear her opinions on their actions. In her role as an academic support teacher, Denise said she finds herself in the classroom of other teachers supporting the academic success of struggling students. She shared how being racially and culturally competent fosters that success:

Kids work for who they like, who they love, and who they build connections and relationships with. It’s who understands them. If you know the different races and cultures in your classroom, you will have a good year because the kids are going to grow. They’re going to want to work for you when they know that you are on their side and that you understand where they come from. When you know or are empathetic with their situation and show the kids that you may be different, you may look different, but you have a good understanding of their life and can make some kind of connections. You don’t have to live in the apartments or be struggling in some kind of way that they are, but if you can make little connections with things that are important to them that may be cultural to them or something that their race does, it builds their confidence along with academic confidence to have a successful year with that growth mindset.

Whereas Rick and Denise presented their definition for racial and cultural competence, Sandra grappled with responding to this question. When Sandra was asked to define racial and cultural competence, she described examples that helped show differences in the term in practice. She highlighted, “It doesn’t necessarily have to do with reading a word problem that has somebody’s name in it that might sound like a cultural name.” Sandra expressed it was hard for her to define the term, but she believed it related to bringing the students' community into the instruction. She laughed and hid
her face when commenting, “it’s so hard to define racial and cultural competence clearly without saying what it looks like or doesn’t look like.” After being given sufficient wait time, she stated that she couldn’t find the words to make a definition for the term, and she believed it is because “it is the way teachers show certain actions that show it.”

As it related to building relationships with students who don’t share the same racial and cultural background, Sandra mentioned that it was harder to establish those relationships in the virtual setting. Due to the pandemic, Sandra was teaching her 1st-grade classroom online via the Zoom platform. She helped to illustrate her point by stating:

The disconnect between virtual and face-to-face, there are just so many missing elements that I find myself trying to supplement to make it engaging. Usually, it would be like my personality or my faces and mannerisms, but now I’m sitting in a chair all day. I think that’s just the biggest thing: trying to be innovative and find new ways to hook them through a screen versus what it would be like face-to-face.

During her explanation, she held her head low and breathed deeply. Her body exhibited disappointment, yet she mentioned how she worked tirelessly to locate ideas that would help build connections with her students on the computer screen. When thinking of her previous years in the classroom, Sandra mentioned that she worked diligently to notice the physical appearances on different days with students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. She focused on this because she believed it helped to show a sense of uniqueness about the student. In addition, she shared that being a great listener of her students when they are sharing in a community circle helps her revisit some of their
statements and incorporate them into her lessons. One example Sandra shared to support this was her ability to discuss foods and traditions that she enjoys from her family and allow students to communicate their ideas related to their family. It is understandings like these that help her to support her students academically.

Sandra stated that she believed being racially and culturally competent could support academic success. Similar to Rick, she noted the basis of the success was built with the foundation of understanding.

I think just understanding, in general, like um my children are half Hispanic from their dad and from his family I understand that it takes family and community support like a group is how like Hispanics and Latins tend to believe—also, gathering especially around celebrating things or the kitchen like food always. I feel like that’s kind of the same that I’ve learned from being in the third ward (Black community), like food always brought back like a sense of home and warmth and comfort. We talked about just like that community support but in a different way because in the third ward like the community was like friends of friends that grew up together and cousins and grandparents, whereas in like the Hispanic community, it is just like cousins and brothers and sisters it’s not really like friends of friends. It’s just what I’ve seen over the years working in two different types of settings. It goes back to that understanding of the background. I don’t want to say like researching but almost being like a fly on the wall and letting it come to you in a natural way instead of forcing it and being observant of that and being able to apply it back in.
Sandra believed that once a teacher collects information about the community and culture of their students, then they can effectively embed those understanding into their instruction. Despite feeling connected to her students and their community, she mentioned that an experience from the previous school year made her feel the most uncomfortable when considering how to support students from different racial backgrounds to achieve academic success. She recounted the situation while tapping her foot and wrapping her arms around herself:

In meetings, it was mentioned that I was performing higher with African American students. So, they wanted to somehow create a rotation for intervention time, so these low-performing students would come through my classroom just to get instruction for math in an intervention group. I didn’t really feel comfortable looking at education that way because I don’t think they should be labeled by race or anything like that, and unfortunately like that’s on our records and how we look at data. I don’t ever want them to notice that everybody in this group looks just like me, and we’re all going to this teacher, and we’re the only ones that go every day. I’m so thankful that never happened because I didn’t feel like that was best practice. It was discussed, and it was never implemented because I never decided to go that direction, and no one forced me to either. I just didn’t feel comfortable with it like it felt like segregation again to me. Like separating and pulling out a small group of students just because they perform well with one teacher, and they’re this subgroup, I did not feel comfortable with that. I feel like it needs to be inclusive. We need to do a rotating group of multiple students that are mixed coming in and out so they can learn from each other because to me
thinking about it even deeper in this conversation like we’re just kind of like repeating that cycle again because now we’re separating the cultures and who knows what we could learn from each other if we would have just stayed included together because we all come from different walks of life.

At this moment in the interview, Sandra was profoundly engaged, and I proceeded to question her to consider a different perspective from the one her administration presented her. Despite not sharing the same racial background, I asked Sandra to reflect on why her administration would believe she was the best teacher to support the African American population. In her reflection of that question, Sandra thought that it wasn’t her race the administration considered. She knew it was the concern to improve the schools’ overall data for the district that positioned the discussion about her African American students’ data being significantly higher than her partner teachers. It seemed as if the school needed the African American population to show higher academic growth, and they were willing to try anything to get it, including making Sandra comfortable. Sandra’s ability to support a specific racial population of students academically directly relates to the belief in growing students for success.

Sandra possesses experience working in settings that consist of predominantly students of African American and Hispanic backgrounds. In these settings, she stated she never felt like she was an outsider. While people made jokes about “the white girl” being their teacher or staff, they never treated her differently. In her recount of these experiences, she mentioned a similar site to one I had heard in previous interviews with Denise. I came to learn that both Sandra and Denise had worked in the same school building in years prior, both at the beginning of their teaching careers but not at the same
time. In previous comments made by Denise, the administration questioned her abilities given her racial identification of being Black and having the capabilities necessary to educate other Black children. However, Sandra had a separate encounter in this setting. She reported that she had not realized she and Denise worked for the same principal until they met at the research site. In their discussions of the previous worksite, Sandra explained how they have different viewpoints of the Black female principal. I asked Sandra if she felt like their experiences were different due to their races, and she replied, “Yes, maybe it could have been because I was white. I have no idea because there was only me and one other Hispanic girl. The rest of the staff was Black”. When Sandra responds to this question, she says that the Black principal valued her as a White female. While Sandra mentioned multiple times that others identify her as the “White girl,” she does not use that term when identifying racially. This issue of her presenting this term in relation to others' comments versus how she presents herself was unexplored yet noted throughout the analysis.

While each participant has encountered distinctive experiences based on their racial and cultural backgrounds, their professional encounters amplify their sense of knowing. In their early experiences, each participant articulated their lack of engagement with coursework or professional training focused on race and culture. Despite the non-existence of formal training, each participant encountered race and culture throughout their teacher preparation programs. However, their entry into their professional careers as educators required them to intermingle their values and beliefs with the diversity of the educational settings they served. Each participant has taken their role as an educator to uplift and provide hope to their students despite their racial and cultural backgrounds.
They continuously seek to build relationships with their students to impact their academic success. Yet, the more significant aspects of their educational setting must be considered to assist in these goals.

In their interviews, participants spoke to the realities of not having their administration’s help to achieve academic success for their students. While on the other hand, they consistently engaged in meetings to be questioned on their data and abilities to ensure academic success occurs. To understand the participants' point of view, in the following section, an analysis of documents will shed light on the policies and curriculum decisions made by the administration. This document analysis is vital to the research as it explores the correlation between the school district's vision and goals and the perceptions of the educators who work daily to enact the realities of the expectations. Following the document analysis, the ideas of the participating teachers will be considered as it relates to these policies and decisions.

**Document Analysis**

In the final section of this chapter, an analysis of a document review is followed by presenting the research participants’ perceptions of the policies and strategic plan at the district level and the research site. Documentary analysis has been chosen as a way of collecting data to add rigor to a study through a multi-method form of triangulation (Cardno, 2018). This discussion is vital in the analysis because it provides the overview that lays the foundation for the perceptions for opinions of the educators. At the same time, they seek to understand racial and cultural competence in their classrooms. As the participants increased their awareness of students' racial and cultural backgrounds, they
The analysis of these documents helps to construct a layered and contextual understanding of the goals school leaders seek to establish. In addition, it provides a triangulation of the data collection tools implemented. The document analysis consisted of reviewing thirty-six official documents and records provided by the school district’s and state’s public websites related to their Strategic Design.

- **Strategic Design Framework** - outlining the strategic design timeline that spans over five academic school years
- **30 Specific Result Reports** - related to sub goals presented within the strategic design framework
- **Four State Administrative Code documents** - articulating the state agency rules as it relates to curriculum mandates in education
- **Curriculum update presentation** - a PowerPoint presented on behalf of the Chief Academic Officer of the school district to the Board of Trustees

When analyzing these documents, the focus was directed on the purpose of the policy and the issues related to its implementation and subsequent impact. The process of examining the documents consisted of comprehending the documents by identifying words or phrases that refer to the policy's purpose and the values that underpin or guide the policy. Cardno (2018) argues that this type of analysis is considered a content analysis appropriate for adopting organizational policy documents. After coding the documents, patterns were discovered that aligned to the perceptions and opinions presented by the
participants. These patterns helped elaborate the overall impact, current strengths and positive aspects, and current concerns and negative aspects.

The policies and decisions made within Kendall Independent School District (Kendall ISD- a pseudonym is used) are formulated based on the district's goals to support student achievement. The document analysis offers the functional context of Kendall ISD. It builds significance that allowed participants to communicate their existence and points of view within the function of the school district and research site during the third interview session. It is the daily work of the participants to implement instruction in their classrooms that are rooted in the goals and framework set by the district. Educators expressed variant levels of tension present due to their perceptions, student considerations in combination with district and campus-level expectations.

**School District Demographics**

Kendall ISD provides a public dashboard online that includes information related to their student enrollment, academic performance, employee statistics, and financials. The dashboard reported a combined enrollment of 89,069 students within 74 schools at the elementary (grades pre-k through 5), junior high (grades 6-8), and high school levels. Below, Figures 4.1 and 4.2 display the breakdown of the student enrollment based on racial categories.
Based on the data, the Hispanic population is the largest student group within the district, followed by the White student group. It is imperative to present the demographic information for educators who Kendall ISD employs. The demographic data helps to glean a view into comparing teachers and staff to that of the student population. Figure 4.3 shows the breakdown for teachers employed by Kendall ISD for the 2020-2021 school year.

The demographic data for Kendall shows that the student population is more diverse than the teachers employed. While the racial category for White is the second largest demographic for students, it is the first demographic amongst staff. Hispanics and
African Americans represent less than 25% of the teacher population, yet the student population represents nearly 50% of this demographic. Within the district improvement plan posted on Kendall’s website, the past five years have consistently increased student and teacher populations for Asian, Hispanic, and African American people. In addition, the district states that it seeks to recruit and hire a diverse staff population that resembles its’ student demographics.

**Strategic Design Documents**

To ensure Kendall ISD is a top-tier public school district, they have created a strategic design. The strategic plan is the planning that sets priorities and works to ensure that community stakeholders and district staff are working toward common goals to foster student achievement. The objectives within the strategic plan document are articulated in steps that the district will be laser-focused on implementing across the span of five academic school years. At the end of each school year, the community is provided a progress summary for the goals implemented. Kendall’s strategic plan includes eight overall goals encompassing forty-two sub-goals to accomplish each overarching goal.

The document review entailed analyzing the goals within the strategic plan related to the participant interview analysis. The table presented in Figure 4.4 provides a comprehensive summary of the goals within Kendall’s strategic design plan that were analyzed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Sub-Goal</th>
<th>Year Targeted</th>
<th>Progress Reflection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal 1: All learning environments will foster engagement by integrating personalized</td>
<td>1.3 Review the Grading and Reporting Handbook to identify opportunities that support</td>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>Currently, the Grading and Reporting Handbook specifies requirements for teachers to offer re-assessment opportunities for both elementary and secondary students to ensure they have more than one opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the objectives. The committee reported that the previously established re-assessment opportunities supported personalized learning for students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal: Learning Experiences</td>
<td>Personalized Learning</td>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>Kendall creates and develops designs for new and renovated buildings, ensuring spaces provide flexibility in instruction as safety and security.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.4 Establish structures that support a collaborative, flexible, safe, and respectful learning environment</td>
<td>2021-2022</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Provide various experiences that address all learners' distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds.</td>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>In February of 2018, a presentation regarding the changing demographics of Kendall ISD was presented to the Kendall ISD Leadership Team by the Chief Operations Officer. The purpose of the exhibition was to build a district-wide understanding of the rapid growth in student enrollment and demonstrate the evolving diversity and changes to the overall socioeconomic breakdown of Kendall ISD students. Further, it was noted that these rapidly changing demographics could directly impact resource allocation and the district’s ability to maintain the level of resources available. Presentation of this information will prove valuable to campus and district leaders as they develop their Campus and District Improvement Plans to direct resources at the campus and district levels. During the presentation, district leaders were allowed to give opinions. Additionally, participants were asked to provide input regarding future resource allocation considering changing demographics and solicited feedback for anticipated changes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal 2: Develop systems where customized resources will ensure equity in response to the needs of a growing district with rapidly changing demographics.</td>
<td>2020-2021</td>
<td>Kendall examined access to select programs and staff that support students' academic and personal success. The process began with identifying potential barriers to accessing specialized programs that provide students greater flexibility and options than the traditional school day. They examined and updated application processes for these programs to make them more easily accessible to students; re-evaluated and revised the program acceptance criteria to establish consistency and equity; and plans to renovate the two campuses to allow for greater enrollment capacity.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1 Develop a communication plan that articulates the need for customized resource allocation in response to changing demographics</td>
<td>2021-2022</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 3: Develop meaningful, effective, and practical practices that inspire and inform students and educators toward continuous improvement</td>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>In response to Specific Result 3.1, the Kendall ISD Assessment Council worked to ensure assessments that measure learner progress and growth were incorporated into the curriculum and instructional materials. Measures of student growth advancement were reviewed and aligned to the District Assessment Framework.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Organize internal educator groups that will develop various appropriate measures to determine learner progress and growth.</td>
<td>2019-2020</td>
<td>Survey Results Summary: Staff identified they preferred giving a choice to students to demonstrate their learning; Students, on the other hand, revealed they preferred demonstrations and presentations to show teachers their understanding; Staff indicated that they preferred face-to-</td>
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increase educator expertise when measuring learner skill acquisition.

face learning from their peers and instructional coaches; The preferred times for professional development were during the school day and also in the summer.

3.3 Utilize a variety of measures to monitor the learner’s progress toward skill acquisition.

2020-2021 During the fall of 2020, the elementary and secondary curriculum teams, alongside instructional coaches, collaboratively developed various measures to monitor student learning progress. These measures are now available in the District Unit Plans. Implementation of the measures is ongoing and will continue into the 2021-2022 school year.

3.4 Provide timely, relevant, and actionable feedback that is focused on learner strengths and weaknesses.

2020-2021 Feedback will continue to be explicitly collected on these learning progress measures in the fall of 2021, and adjustments will be made as needed.

Goal 8: Kendall ISD will actively support the emotional well-being of all learners

8.1 Define responsibilities, roles, and referral systems for all stakeholders to support the emotional well-being of learners.

2017-2018 A Kendall ISD core team to support goal eight has been formed and meets regularly to discuss strategies to support the emotional well-being of students. This year the team worked to define the responsibilities, roles, and referral systems for all stakeholders to support the emotional well-being of all learners.

8.4 Provide activities to engage stakeholders to build positive relationships.

2019-2020 Kendall ISD currently has 122 personnel, including school counselors, Licensed Specialists in School Psychologists (LSSPs), social workers, and the Bullying Prevention Coordinator, trained as certified trauma practitioners. This team will provide campus-based trauma-informed training in the 2020-21 school year. In addition to the certified practitioners, over 600 Kendall ISD employees, including administrators, teachers, nurses, and paraprofessionals, have participated in trauma-informed training opportunities since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Figure 4.4

The vision and actionable goals of Kendall ISD are imperative to consider as participants discuss policy considerations in their final interview. The above purposes outlined by the strategic document will be integrated within the next section to exemplify the contrasting and similarities amongst the participants and the school district and administrators. While all of the goals within Kendall ISD’s strategic plan aim to support students and staff in achieving academic excellence, the perspectives and opinions of the participants provided correlations directly with the goals mentioned above. In the final sections of this chapter, participants will have the opportunity to reflect and share their perceptions on the policies
and curriculum decisions made by the school district and administration of their research site.

**Research Participants’ Perception of Policies and Strategic Plan**

As a classroom teacher and a researcher, I understand a component of our role includes seeking to advance the policies and expectations of school and district leadership and state department agencies. However, there are moments in the career where lived experience counters the directives. At this point, the overall vision of top leaders collides with the realities that occur within the classroom. Each participant had the opportunity to consider the roles of their administrators and school district in their daily actions as an educator.

Rick focused his response on students when asked about a policy or directive that he disagreed with regarding students and families. He shared his experiences with struggling with behavior management as well as grading and assessment expectations. Rick began by expressing his experiences as they related to the lack of discipline management.

There was one situation where a student had been repeatedly caught pretending like he was shooting his classmates with either his finger, or with a ruler, or a book or something holding it up like a weapon. He had disciplined referrals that were written up, parents were contacted all that stuff, but it just kept happening. In my opinion, something more should have been done. Like maybe had, like, a lunch detention or something, but he obviously wasn't getting the message because he kept doing it and there was really nothing further done. I feel like there's certain situations where suspensions need to happen when there's a
behavior that's being repeated over and over again. It's that type of behavior I think is kind of serious.

While expressing his opinions, Rick presented tightly clenched lips and moved with his hands wavering back and forth. His body language signaled the same frustrations that he was articulating. None of the goals within Kendall ISD strategic plan design utilized the words discipline. However, goals focused on students' emotional and mental health involved creating reporting concerning student behaviors and signs of distress. The flow chart visual of this district policy is represented in figure 4.5 below.

Figure 4.5

Based on Rick's description, the policy requires campus staff to notify the school counselor with the student's name and the description of the behavior. The nurse evaluates the concern and completes a risk assessment that determines if the counselor should contact the parent to provide intervention resources or the school administrator if
the student indicates harming others. The final step involves consistent follow-up with the student from the school counselor. Given Rick's description, it would suffice that the student didn’t pose a risk of harming others. Rick continued to elaborate why he felt the lack of an effective action to punish the student was significant for him:

I’ve been at schools where the behavior policy was more strict, and the consequences were more cut and dry and more severe. Then I’ve been in schools where it was laxer, and students were able to basically get away with more without having really being held accountable. So, I prefer a stricter policy just because I just think that's the way it should be. I think students should be held accountable for their actions, and if actions are repeated, then more serious consequences need to be put in place.

Based on his reflection, Rick highlights a concern that is thrust into the field of education repeatedly. A study conducted by Fabelo (2012) on how school discipline relates to students’ success showed that students who are suspended or expelled, particularly those who were frequently disciplined, were more likely to be held back a grade or drop out of school than the students who were not involved in the disciplinary system (Fabelo, 2012). Kendall ISD’s strategic goal eight, focused on students' social and emotional well-being, seems to have considered data as significant as this study. As a result, Kendall has taken an approach that requires educators to provide intervention and supports for students versus punishing them for their behaviors. In addition, subgoal 8.4 in the strategic plan focuses on implementing multiple staff members in the district to respond to the trauma and restorative practices that build relationships with students.
Rick continued to express his perspective with other district policies that he believes impact his students outside of behavior.

I greatly disagreed with the re-teach retest policy that we had previously here, where students were allowed to retest. It wasn't like an average of the two scores. They were allowed to retest and basically get a hundred or get the higher of the two scores. I thought that led to more grade elevation. I think it boosted up grades more in some cases, and it wasn't a true picture of how students were really performing because they were given that extra chance. I’m fine with the re-teaching and the re-testing, but I think it should be like it is now, which is an average or the highest that they can get is a 70.

Rick’s above opinion directly correlates with Kendall’s strategic plan goal 1.3. Within his reflection of the policy, he also indicated the changes that have been implemented. While referencing the more recent policy evolution, Kendall ISD began focusing its attention on this policy in the academic school year of 2017-2018. Grading policies and expectations are directly aligned to support a student on their journey of being academically successful. Yet, Rick highlighted that grades are at times not indicators of the skill ability of a student when in comparison to other assessments. The multiple attempts for the same assessment struggle to reveal if the student can master the content as there is a caution for remembrance due to repeating the same evaluation.

When asked his perspective on how the district considers the racial and cultural backgrounds of the student population, specifically when selecting curriculum materials and resources, Rick grappled with considering the personal aspect of the question concerning his content area.
That's a tough one coming from a math science perspective. From what I’ve seen in the library, there seems to be a pretty diverse selection of books that seems to be pretty culturally comprehensive. I’m not an expert in the library either. As far as math and science goes, it's hard for me to speak to that because math and science are pretty concrete. I don't really know how it would be better and be more culturally appropriate.

None of the goals in the strategic plan focuses directly on the selection of curriculum materials and resources. While the overall articulation of goal 2 sought to address customized resources to ensure equity, none of the results yielded the selection of essential resources. In subgoal 2.1, the district created a presentation to inform the community and stakeholders about the changing demographics of the student population. Yet, the only actionable response that was taken to implement was campuses submitting a needs assessment. The district does engage in a textbook adoption process for all the content areas. This process includes a survey that allows teachers and curriculum staff to rank and identify descriptors of a resource that will significantly support the student population. Ultimately, the district curriculum department makes the final selection of the curriculum and resources purchased. Rick summarized his perspective on this process.

I would venture to guess that when all of these materials were being selected for the whole district that my perception is that probably not all student populations were carefully considered. That's just kind of my guess, given how big the district is and how different one school's student population can be from another school's student population. I would guess it was kind of a more generalized selection rather than carefully considering the cultural components.
Shifting from a school district focus, Rick looked at how the school site considers its student population when planning instruction.

When we were doing our planning and our data analysis that is looking at the sub-pops, there was actually an occasion not too long ago this year when we were doing a PLC (Professional Learning Community) about one of our most recent assessments. I was told that the data showed my African American students were doing very well or improving quite a bit on the assessment. They then asked can I share with them my strategies and what do I do specifically with that population of students. Well, I didn't really know what I was doing, but that was an example of how we do consider the different student populations as we're looking at data. It's all broken down and we discuss what are some strategies that we can use in order to help this particular subset of students progress more, or if this subset of students is doing great, how can we enrich them so that they can be challenged even more.

This comment was similar to what Sandra discussed in her meeting with the administration team as they reviewed data earlier on in her second interview. Attempting to gather a better understanding of how Rick processed the discussion, I asked him to explain how he responded to the viewpoint presented by his administration team. He explained:

When I thought about it I didn't feel like I was doing anything particularly different with that subset that I would with any subset of students. I think I have good relationships with the students, I think I provide them small group instruction consistently, and when I see that they're struggling I try to provide
them with as much one-on-one as I possibly can. I’m just checking in with them. I’m making sure that they’re feeling good about what we’re doing in the classroom and providing any extra help that I can for them. I’m just letting them know that I’m available if they have any questions, and I think they feel comfortable in coming to me if they’re confused about something. I think I do the same thing for all students, so I don't think I specifically do that for one subset of students and not for others. That's how I teach.

Like Sandra, Rick responded with an understanding that he was not explicitly tailoring his instruction to his African American population of students. He felt all of his attempts made in the classroom were to support all students in their journey to academic success. Rick explained that the success of their African American student population was not a result of any specific instruction implemented.

Sandra was asked about her perception of policies implemented by school administrators or the district, and she allowed her reflection to be based on processes. She focused on the processes that supported students through the special education identification that she believed exhibited the lack of consideration for the students and families. Her experience with this process also led one of her parents to highlight her racial background as an educator as an indicator of her student underachievement. Sandra recalled the entire situation:

I was completely lost when I came to Kendall when it came to inclusion, Special Ed, Gift and Talented students, and all of that. I’m not sure what it was; if there were no processes or software for RTI (Response to Intervention) developed in my previous school district. To me, that was like a big red flag that they (the
previous school district) just didn't care, they didn't make it happen, and that was very broken. In my last year there, I actually did have a kid that was very low, and his mom was like, “well, he's not gonna learn from her anyway because she's white.” Okay, but he was truly SpEd like he could barely function to like button his pants, his speech was very off, and he couldn't even put words together to form a sentence. Yet, there was nothing ever done when I asked questions. They would just roll it off because there just weren't processes. I think that's what made me feel like super uncomfortable towards the end because, after that year, I left and came to Kendall.

Sandra’s response focused on her frustration with her previous school district, which ultimately led to her quitting. She did not clarify to what degree she considered the parent’s comments concerning her ability to educate her student due to her racial background. Sandra used this reflection to focus on her frustration with the district’s inability to identify students who demonstrated struggles with academics and social-emotional skills. However, Sandra elaborated that the concern for qualifying a student for Special Education services in Kendall ISD was just as frustrating as her previous school district. A similar student displayed the inability to form sounds, words and requiring support with walking. It was noticeable within the document review that Kendall ISD sought to develop effective assessments for improvement within goal 3. However, the sub-goals of goal three have no mention or focus on students of the special education population. The goals within this vision establish the need to measure learners’ skill acquisition but do not entail how the assessments will be used. At the moment of
frustration with discussing the lack of processes, Sandra acknowledged Kendall’s policies continue to make huge impacts on her ability to support struggling students.

Given the pandemic, Sandra was teaching her 1st-grade classroom online via the Zoom platform the entire school year. Sandra explained that overall the district needed to communicate expectations for their online learning model effectively.

The district rolled out a newsletter, and it said your camera must be turned on, but yet there's a girl here that the mom is like her daughter has a skin condition. She would leave school all the time last year in kindergarten for it. Now she is sitting in my classroom and is allowed to have her camera turned off because I guess the administration was tired of her mom calling about it. Never have I said you need to turn your camera on or you must turn your camera on because I truly didn't know they had to until I read the newsletter myself. The district sent out that exact same slide on their newsletter this past week. So, when I talked to her mom yesterday, I was like, look, the policy says her camera has to be on that's in the handbook, the school is allowing you to keep it off, and I’m okay with that, but I’m not okay when she's not here in class. She's turning on the camera, and she's walking away. I probably get a thumbs up twice a day, but her work is coming out great. When she was with me the other day, her brother was reading the book to her in her ear. I was like, I can hear you, I’m not testing your brother; I’m testing you, and you need to read this book.

Her irritation was visible as she elaborated on how the cameras turned on in the virtual school setting impacted her role as an educator. She expressed her level of understanding about the purpose and goal the district was implying.
I think it supports teachers because how do I know the work that you're producing if you can't even show me. I'm saying hold it up to the screen, but yet one screen is always black, and now I have a couple of other students that are trying to do it this week. I literally have to say turn your camera on; you don't have permission to have it off per our principal. So now I have to interrupt instruction to fix that, but it's not fair because the handbook says this thing, but you get to do this.

Sandra’s comments lend to the intent of goals 1 and 3 in Kendall’s strategic plan. Noteworthy, the district could not have anticipated the global Pandemic when developing its strategic plan. Similarly, school districts worldwide were charged with developing a new learning model during the mandated stay-at-home orders. These changes impacted Sandra’s role as an educator and led to her speculations of how it will ultimately impact students when allowed to return to school.

One of the students, his mom, is never doing anything except fighting with the dad in the background. She's never there sitting side by side. She does his work because he said it to me like the third week of school “oh yeah, I finished all that see so my mom did it for me.” Then when I was trying to test him and fix like some things that he skipped on the math test, he kept turning off his camera and turning off his sound because I know that mom was right there telling him to do that so he could do the answer. It didn't matter how many times I said to stop doing it; I can't control that. I feel like an unsuccessful teacher, and when we come back face to face, they're going to be extremely low and have gaps, and I’m going to look like a liar because of what I have to put in the grade book.
Her focus on grading and expectations lead the discussion into the area of curriculum and instruction. Rick also mentioned the concern of grading in his worries about policies implemented by the district. Sandra expressed her concern related to the assessments required of the reading curriculum and the age-appropriateness of its expectations.

I don't feel like it's mentally appropriate with the expectations from the rubrics that we're using. I think that we're very much confusing kids with all the strategies we're shoving down their throats. I understand that they're trying to find the strategy that works best for them, but I feel like it's broken when I’m forcing a child to use a specific strategy. I didn't learn math that way, and I feel like I’m successful, and I was able to graduate college with what I did and how I was taught. Right now, I feel like we're dumbing down our youth by giving them too much of that. Also, taking away from science and social studies, it irritates me that our state doesn't care, and it comes down the grapevine to where our leadership doesn't care if it gets taught or touched. It's given 20 minutes a day, and we're trying to plan engaging lessons for six-year-olds, but there's a 20-minute time and things that we need to do with them that we don't even have the time to do it.

Within her response, Sandra explained the school curriculum expectations chosen for the district and how it requires her to teach mathematics. The assessments and rubrics she mentioned directly result from goals one and three within Kendall’s strategic plan. The purpose of creating assessments that measure student progress and grading is repeatedly mentioned within the documents for these goals. The strategic plan places multiple emphases on implementing multiple assessments to track student growth as a high
priority. Sandra naturally shifted from thinking about what the curriculum requires into reflecting on her perception of why decisions are being made in this manner.

Nothing is sticking, so they're like losing history, which I think is important because that's where we came from. I almost feel like it's planned to like wash away history so they can kind of like let us forget what was, and this is what is. That's not fair either because how do we grow as adults? We reflect on what we've been through. Same thing in society; we grow from what we've been through, but we're like not even really teaching or talking about it, so it's growing less important, like at a first-grade level for a six-year-old. Then as they continue in their career, how important is it to them because the foundation was never here to begin with. The unit planning guides need growth. I’ve been watching those planning guides for like five or six years in Kendall. I think they haven't changed at all the only thing being updated is math, reading, and writing.

She explains how she encourages her teacher team to plan different lessons for students beyond what the district provides to support, including more diverse and relevant individuals that students can connect to during the social studies components of the school day. When asked how the school considers the race and cultural backgrounds of the student population when discussing curriculum and implementation and data analysis, Sandra specifically thought of the display and experiences students encounter with books in the school library. This was a notice that Rick also expressed as the most visible component of race and culture highlighted in the research site. Sandra highlighted her life experiences and understanding about the multiple groups of people in the world that caused her to change her instruction for her students. “I have to be innovative to
figure out how to reach the kids and what's going to spark the learning for them.” In her experience, she explains that in addition to a lack of culture representing her students, it is the inability to present success referencing different genders in the curriculum.

Given her vocal disagreements on many aspects of the district’s curriculum and expectations, I inquired what she believed would be the best way for the research site to support classroom educators engaging in the topic of racial and cultural competence:

How many times are you in school where you hear it being talked about, and from your leadership, you don't very much unless it's a number for data, so why not. We are predominantly Hispanic, but we also need to recognize all cultures. Like you think about our Christmas read-aloud, most of them are like Too Many Tamales or something like that when we probably need to mix it up some more. It might go back to just like being in a culturally engrossed school.

From her articulation, Sandra believes that beginning with the mindset of the leadership within a school building is a requirement to impacting change in its educators. While she acknowledges the school focuses on the diverse student population, it is not focused on their ability to see representation within themselves. The focus on understanding different student population groups is strictly discussed within data meetings after students are given assessments. It is also evident in her response that while the school attempts to integrate the predominant Hispanic culture into its celebrations, it is necessary to broaden the focus and seek out other cultures. On the other hand, the documents presenting the 5-year plan included goal 1.5, which seeks to provide various learning experiences that address all learners' distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds. That goal is to be implemented within the 2021-2022 school year. At the
research time, no data was available on how and what the district was attempting to do for this sub-goal.

Kendall ISD’s decisions concerning calendar holidays for the student population have impacted parents and their educators. Denise was able to bring significance to this when she expressed how the school district enacts policies that affect students and families. She mentioned the canceling of observed holidays through the school calendar that began with the Black student and staff population questioning the mindsets of its school district leaders.

When they took away Martin Luther King Day in Kendall, I feel like that was dishonorable for Dr. King and the black people who work for the district. Every other district recognized that day. For about three years, the numbers went up for how many teachers were taking off that day. Every year they decide which holidays we get, and it wasn't on both calendars as options when they came out. They didn't ask our opinion or anything. I mean, you know that's one of the things about Kendall. Sometimes, because it is predominantly one race over others, they don't take in those considerations for teachers and students. Even having Black history stuff or celebrating those things. The school could decide to do something, but district-wide it's not recognized. They don’t recognize the different cultures that are in the schools on a district level.

Denise began her interview by sincerely expressing her opinions about the district. Kendall ISD acknowledged and recognized that their demographics are changing (goal 2). However, there was no reference to an actionable step that determines how they will respond to the increased racial and cultural shifts occurring in their student populations.
As the interview proceeded, Denise began to vocalize her genuine opinion about Kendall ISD regarding racial and cultural backgrounds when selecting the curriculum.

I don't think they do enough. I should say not that I’ve seen. I’ve heard that books or things like that deal with some of the topics that we're dealing with race, you know, like policing, they've been pulled from the library. So, somebody has the idea to bring literature or resources of that nature that might be a little controversial that students need to have conversations about because it's happening in real life. Because it might paint other folks in a negative light, it's been banned because they have that kind of influence, I guess at the top. When the book fair comes, students see different pieces of literature, different characters, different colors, but as far as in the classroom, you have to be careful of the things that you bring. You have to get approval for everything, which I understand, but you know I just feel like it's not, and it could be more diverse.

Denise’s reflection supported similar perspectives from the other participants. Each of them believed that there were elements of racial and cultural content within the library in the school building but did not believe district leaders valued that same focus when selecting the instructional materials. Denise continued to express the limited flexibility educators are given when considering instructional materials. She explained that because the resources lack relevance to the student population, teachers begin to consider their students by “exposing them to different pieces and different resources.” Making similar adjustments to the curriculum as Denise describes is deemed to be necessary for her point of view “because you want to build that relationship with the kids to show them there's
something you know that we can learn about and you're familiar with.” She reiterates that it would be easier for students to show growth if they could connect with the content.

While goal 2.2 focuses on creating a system that ensures equity for all students, the goal resulted in reviewing access to programs within the district. The review conducted by the school district did not analyze the instructional materials for equity. In addition, Kendall’s strategic plan will ensure they provide a variety of learning experiences that address distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds of all learners (goal 1.5). The district has yet to begin the journey of accomplishing this goal.

**Making a Shift**

Kendall ISD’s strategic plan lays the foundation for its vision to improve continuously. Participants were asked their opinion on how the district could support classroom educators engaging in the topic of racial and cultural competence. Each had a different perspective, yet collectively they referenced district leaders and administrators as the starting point. Rick articulated the actions will require having knowledgeable teachers who experience race and culture to be involved in the efforts.

There could always be more professional development on this particular topic bringing in speakers or educators who are more well-versed in it and can educate us more on the topic. I think there's probably a lot of teachers out there who need to learn more about it. Not that they don't want to learn more about it, but maybe they just haven't had the opportunity. Every year classrooms will get more diverse; it will continue to be that way, so I think more professional development opportunities and getting teachers more involved in decision-making processes
that go into the curriculum. I know that teachers are involved to a point but maybe not the right teachers are involved all the time. Maybe the teachers who teach the most diverse student populations aren't getting a strong enough voice. So, maybe the district could tap into the knowledge of the teachers that are in the trenches every day and who understand what it means to be culturally responsive and who have a good track record of it—just allowing them to have more input into the decision-making process.

His voice brings into a positive outlook the desire of many teachers to learn more about racial and cultural competence. Yet, he realizes that the individuals required to lead the charge must know how to teach diverse students because they embody the lived experiences. He believes that the topic must also be included in the area of curriculum selection. Rick realized that experience and knowledge are required to bring racial and cultural competence into Kendall ISD.

Sandra detailed that Kendall ISD should ensure racial and cultural competence discussion given the historical events occurring within the world. She explained how intentional steps from the district and school community must address and help support students with the current circumstances.

Everything that just happened in our country over the last few months, I think, has brought awareness, and I can only hope that from that, people will be more sensitive and not just to our African American community, or our Hispanic community, our Asian community but like in general and everybody. It's a big deal that we look different; we are different, but that's what started our country, so it doesn't make sense how do we get so far from that. It all starts from the top of
our leadership and the expectations that they have put, like on our calendars what we're going to highlight and things like that. I can only do what I can do in my room is still how I feel at the end of the day. I think just talking about it in general like.

Sandra seemed to accept that the vantage point of the conversation must include a minority. She believes that differences made this country, and we must learn to accept each other’s differences to begin the work of moving forward. While she considers the priorities that school leaders set helped cultivate discussions on racial and cultural competence, she has accepted that her control is only on her classroom.

Like how we have the kids practice something we want them to learn, teachers have to practice. It can't just be a speaker coming in, and then suddenly, we have all these great ideas, but how is it implemented. How can teachers get some experience with how to manage some behaviors or how to have conversations about race and culture. I don't know talking to parents or community members outside of their community because that too is slightly biased. If you have only certain people in your community and go into your community board, those conversations will differ from what people on the other side of town might be talking about. We're all part of the same district, different parts of town, you know. So I think two teachers who are maybe in the more affluent areas should come to the other schools and see what's going on there and how we can be successful with our kids and have certain conversations. Because yes, you might be a more affluent school, but that doesn't mean that a student from a different background can't attend your school if they're living in that area, and what are you
going to do about those kids that come. Just providing opportunities for teachers to really have those experiences and not just a book. A book club might help, but again it's not teachers from the same campus as teachers from different campuses who can provide insights or their experience working with other kids from different demographics.

Denise advocates pushing educators to step behind just learning and beginning to implement the practices they know. Like Rick, she strongly suggests the voice of educators who have the experience to share their stories with others. Surprisingly, Denise introduced a new level of inequality that she believes occurs based on comparing different school locations within the district. It seemed as if she focused on the differences based on socio-economic status. The ideas she presents encourages collaboration across the school district for educators to share their lived experiences.

As each participant places hope for change, they are aware it is their responsibility to implement the policies constructed by district leaders and stakeholders. Within Kendall ISD, change is described and represented through the creation and implementation of the strategic plan documents. As a result of the data collection, including the participant interviews and document analysis, prominent themes emerged: (1) Leading by example to make race and culture a necessary component outside of analyzing student state and local assessment data; (2) Creating an environment and culture that is responsive to students’ social and emotional well-being, yet lacking structural procedures for behavior and academic struggles; (3) Cultivating growth mindsets while inflating grading and implementing multiple assessments measures; (4) Advocating for teacher voices within in decision making for selection in curriculum and resources that supports the student
population (5) Teacher preparation programs considering the actualities of the career. The themes seem to have placed exacerbating stress levels on the participants as classroom teachers. In the following chapter, these themes will be explored through the interpretation of the data.

**Summary**

The goal of data analysis in qualitative research aims to organize the vast amount of collected data into a logical structure to enable the researcher to understand better the information gathered (Efron & Ravid, 2013). In this chapter, an analysis of the semi-structured interviews interweaved the three participants lived experiences. The interview analysis highlighted the data collected using the following categories: Inspiration, Teacher Preparation, and Relationships Build Academic Success. Following the interview analysis, the focus on the participants' lived experiences through race and culture produced two sub-categories: Early Experiences and Making a Definition. The chapter closed with a document review of educational policies constructed and implemented within the research site to provide a contextual analysis as the participants considered the macro level of their experiences. In the final chapter of this dissertation research, I present a synthesis and interpretation of the data and offer the study findings related to the emerging themes. As the researcher, I will continue to reflect and contemplate the meaning of my findings as it relates to the research questions and triangulate my insights with the literature. I will conclude the fifth and last chapter with implications for educators, parents, administrators, district leaders, and community stakeholders.
Chapter V

INTERPRETATION

The previous chapter of this dissertation research analyzed the data collected revealed through the participants' voices and perspectives. In this final chapter, I offer a synthesis and interpretation of the data and share the findings that emerged from the participant's interviews of three public school elementary educators and a review of the documents. I continue the chapter by responding to the research questions that guided my work and considering the implications of the study's findings for educators, parents, administrators, stakeholders, and community members. I end the chapter by recognizing the study's limitations and reflecting on the journey that developed this dissertation. This qualitative study sought to answer three research questions related to racial and cultural competence:

1. How do educators construct the meaning of racial and cultural competence?
2. What are these educators' perspectives on how racial and cultural competence can support the academic success of a diverse student population?
3. How do these educators describe and enact the curriculum based on their students' racial and cultural backgrounds?

Both narrative inquiry and critical race methodologies employed through this research encouraged the ability of the researcher to remain active in the study. These approaches enable the researcher to embody self-awareness while engaging in a reflexive process throughout the interpretation. As I wrote the synthesis and interpretation presented within this chapter, I realized that I did not anticipate many aspects and components of this research that ultimately led to discoveries beyond the research questions. In many ways,
the reader will journey through the findings alongside me, the researcher. The journey provided me with new insights while shifting my perceptions as a researcher and classroom educator.

**Synthesize and Interpretation of The Data**

To engage in interpreting the data, I began by identifying the patterns from the data analysis. Engaging in multiple sessions of rereading and highlighting using codes, I formulated the meaning of the data within the interview transcripts and document reviews. After organizing the patterns into a synthesis matrix, I combined categories based on overarching themes (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Four major themes were derived from the analysis of the data. Each theme was titled to represent the meaning: Identity is Foundational, Preparation Matters, Defining is Difficult, and Policy Creates Tension. Figure 5.1 below provides a visual interpretation of the major themes and their sub-themes, reflecting the patterns and categories I have identified in the data.

*Figure 5.1*
In figure 5.1, the shape in the shaded background is a circle. The four major themes within the circle are representative of the findings derived from the analysis of data collection. The rotating arrows symbolize an ongoing relationship that expresses how each theme interacts with the other. The boxes outside of each primary pattern focus on the sub-categories presented within. Ideally, when divided into four portions to represent the emerging themes, the pieces would be equal in size. However, the colorful figures in the shaded circle are of different sizes and unproportionate. These pieces are symbolic of the degree to which each theme presented itself within the interpretation process given patterns throughout the data. The unproportionate themes and the gaps in connecting each piece are positioned purposefully. Each theme will be presented interweaving the findings from the sub-categories structured by: (1) interpreting aspects of the data collection that give context to the theme and sub-categories, (2) reflecting on literature within the field of research, and (3) my new understandings and wonderings.

**Identity is Foundation**

Self-identification allows you to represent yourself to the world based on how you want others to view your race and culture. In addition, it is lived experiences combined with values and beliefs instilled in you during childhood that help construct an understanding of the world (Harris et al., 2017). The lens through which the participants perceive the lives of others, including their students, families, and the communities they serve, is a direct reflection of their lived experiences. Each participant conducted an oral history interview before their one-on-one interviews. This oral history interview established how they identified racially and culturally. In addition, they gave brief insights into the geographical regions that they have had residence throughout their lives.
Gaining data that acknowledged how each participant self-identified began understanding the participants based on their self-perceived identities and positionality. Each participant's level of detail to describe themselves was thought-provoking, allowing insights focused on their race and culture. Their descriptions also gave a sense of appreciation for their historical lineage amongst their families. Each participant has had the opportunity of living in different geographical regions of the world. All of which were areas that were in stark contrast to their childhood upbringing environments. These journeys allowed the participants to be immersed in different cultures with variant socio-economic statuses. It is the combination of the upbringing, lived experiences throughout life, and engaging in other cultures with individuals from different racial backgrounds that gave them a specific vantage-point on life. Each of them possesses the ability to recognize and allow others to share their culture while also making sense of their new environments.

Rick's was the most intriguing to me of all the self-identifications provided. Rick identified himself racially as White and culturally as Scottish English. His identification
was the first introduction of this type of cultural identification for me. I only pondered the
term in-depth once Denise and I began to process her understanding of the term diversity.

Denise described her privately White institution (PWI) as lacking diversity. When
they allowed her a campus visit, she explained that the university exemplified diversity
by making a subset of the student population visible. However, upon arriving at the
school, it was evident that the campus meant specifically European diversity when they
alluded to a diverse environment. She explained how there were small numbers of people
of color from different racial and cultural backgrounds. As a result, people of color
inevitably supported each other's events because there was never enough of one racial
and cultural group for them to stand alone. Until this point in my life, I never considered
individuals who identify as White to have a culture beyond racial identification. I viewed
the racial identification of White as the majority, and as a result, their "culture" is
embedded in everything within the United States. His identification and Denise's
experience provoked me to consider culture from the perspective of someone who
identifies racially as White.

To me, it sounds naive or superficial given my level of education, but I honestly
felt perplexed. I questioned if this belief was apparent (consciously or subconsciously)
before this research's data collection. I second-guessed the assumptions that I may have
placed on understanding the terms race and culture, for which I will continue to dissect in
the section **Defining is Difficult.** Furthermore, I noted and honored that there is always a
different lens through which I view individuals as a Black female. These lenses are
similar to the other vantage points of the participants. They are based on my lived
experiences, the stories of oppression and racism as told by my ancestors (culturally), and
my schooling that developed my ability to analyze structures and systems from a critical standpoint. I resolved with the realities of my newfound perception of identification: individuals may culturally identify themselves based on many factors that may not be evident based on their racial identification.

After considering the depth of the participant's self-identification and lived experiences, I understood that their identification shaped their responses to questions during the in-depth interviews. Isolating the oral history interviews help to construct an image of each participant for the reader to envision the voices while exploring the viewpoint from which they processed information. Grasping a sense of the identity and perceptions of the participants allowed me to connect back to the opening vignette of the student who communicated his preferential liking giving the differences of his two teachers. The male student understood that he preferred educators who possessed the ability to effectively communicate the connectedness of instruction to the experiences of his peers and his community. Throughout each interview, it was evident that this is the same capability that the participants embody. They, too, were able to take the knowledge of students' home life and community experiences to build relationships that lead to academic success.

Yet, I still considered possibilities that brought me back to my research questions. Did considering the identities of these participants allow the data to surface an answer to "how" they construct and perceive issues? Did lived experiences within different cultures and geographical areas impact the educator's ability to build strong relationships with students who did not share racial and cultural backgrounds? Could this skill set be
what factored into the administrators questioning Sandra and Rick about their practical ability to educate African American students?

While these questions linger, I have engaged in an enlightening discovery: identity impacts instruction. Educators take their values, beliefs, and lived experiences into the classroom. Sandra used her childhood hardships as a lens to understand her school community in their ability to be resilient. She was able to expand on the traditions of her Hispanic students by embracing the heritage of her children, who were Latinas. Rick ensured that students valued the schooling journey by sharing his experience of struggling with mathematics as a child. Having a perspective of the worlds' treatment towards African Americans, Denise ensured to uplift her Black students during every encounter in the school building. The experiences in their lives, during childhood and adulthood, cultivated the participant's ability to make decisions in their classrooms. An educator's sense of identity can be exhibited within their classroom culture (Han et al., 2011). Therefore, exploring identity, including the aspects that make up race and culture, is crucial for prospective and practicing educators in the classroom.

**Preparation Matters**

Despite the route to certification, it is theory coupled with authentic experiences and expert coaching that cultivate an educator to grasp the roles and responsibilities of their job. The participants within this research accentuated their lived experiences to prepare for their teaching careers. Educators must be effectively trained to ensure the academic success of today's diverse student population within public schools. This training can occur through multiple pathways for obtaining a teaching certification within the United States. The educators in this research illustrated the process for some
individuals who chose education as a major from the onset of their college journeys. In contrast, others earn a post-secondary degree specializing in a field unrelated to teaching before making a career shift seeking certification.

Experiences that foster the value of education begin during the years of one's childhood upbringing. The impact of such knowledge is undoubtedly the case for each educator within this research. Denise and Rick were raised in two-parent households. Rick's parents were school educators. Denise's mother worked in the medical field as a nurse while her father was an accountant.

On the other hand, multiple family members raised Sandra. Sandra spent most of her childhood with her father and aunt, who worked as educators for their careers. Throughout their childhood, each participant encountered adults that emphasized the value of obtaining an education through schooling. However, none of the participants mentioned their experiences of having caregivers with post-secondary degrees as inspiration for them to attend college. In addition, Rick or Sandra did not articulate that being in households with practicing educators prompted their passion for being a teacher.

While the desires and pathways that they faced to become certified vary, their reflections of their teacher preparation programs resonate similarities. Collectively, participants expressed that they felt unprepared after their programs and entering the profession. Each participant spoke of how their realities of practice versus theory were tested quickly upon becoming a teacher of record. Rick, who attended a traditional teacher preparation program, highlighted moments when his classroom field observations helped him connect the theoretical content presented in his coursework. Yet, he firmly stated that even within his first year of teaching, he didn't know what he was doing, and
the district was eager just to hire someone to fill a position despite the lack of experience teaching students who were first-year English learners.

Although, unlike Rick, Denise, who attended an alternative certification program after her undergraduate degree, sensed similar unpreparedness. Denise articulated the lack of coursework and learning experiences that her alternative program provided. Ultimately, she expressed learning how to handle her responsibilities during her first years as a teacher of record. On the other hand, Sandra said that her traditional program allowed her multiple opportunities to practice while taking coursework. She narrated how the conversations and coaching of her professors ultimately supported her understanding of life as a teacher.

These findings were striking to me and unearthed new speculations. I couldn't help but wonder if their exposure to educators in their childhood encouraged their considerations to choose teaching as their career pathway? Equally important were my wonderings concerning the values and goals instilled in their teacher preparation programs. Would a change in the policies or expected outcomes within alternative and traditional teaching programs have supported the participants to become more prepared for their teaching careers? These unanswered questions sparked a reflection of my journey into the field of education.

While Sandra and I experienced a village upbringing living with multiple family members, I lacked the experience of witnessing firsthand career professionals. Most of my immediate family members, whom I lived in a household with, worked "blue-collar jobs." This reference describes jobs and labor-intensive positions requiring little to no education beyond high school and providing low compensation. None of my caregivers
or older siblings obtained post-secondary degrees or certifications in a trade. However, like Sandra, I found the comfort of the school building to be an escape from the inconsistencies that occurred in my personal life. The school building was the one place I could explore the world outside of where I lived. I never had a negative encounter in the school environment and used my leisure time at home to engage anyone in a reenactment of the school day with myself as the teacher.

Nevertheless, all of my caregivers placed a value of importance on education. I was encouraged to try my hardest at school and seek to graduate beyond high school. What seemed like an expectation for participants was a lofty goal for me. No one in my immediate family on my mother's side had accomplished going to college. The encounters with school and the reassurance of my caregivers led me to become a teacher.

Nevertheless, I was blessed to have graduated high school and attended college, majoring in elementary education. My traditional teacher preparation program coursework offered theory and authentic classroom experiences. As a result, I felt equipped for survival as an educator beginning in my first year.

Across the ten years, I have been a teacher of record, I have heard many educators attest to the lack of preparation their teacher training programs failed to provide. However, for me, that sentiment was not reciprocal. Many of my peers, who studied at the same teaching program, would converse throughout our first years of teaching, expressing how prepared we felt to take on the responsibilities of our careers. Additionally, we discussed the many successes bestowed upon our students' academic success due to our teacher training program. Maybe, the history of my preparation program added significant value to its ability to prepare educator candidates.
I attended a traditional certification program at Chicago State University. When founded in 1867, Chicago State was a teacher training school. The following 150 years later, the university expanded its career offerings (Chicago State University, 2021). Having a history of educating and preparing future teachers was the foundation of my program. As a result, the program required multiple hours of observation and teaching experiences within public schools alongside the coursework. Immediately implementing theory into practice while obtaining coaching and feedback from the program professors allowed me to gain experience in what soon would become my reality as a teacher. These opportunities occurred before student teaching, which was the program's culmination. This model effectively provided a balance of theory and practice, which leveraged my effectiveness as a teacher. Noteworthy, these experiences allowed me to practice implementing the personas that felt most comfortable to me as I balanced the identity that I brought into the classroom. But I'm reminded often that my experiences with teacher preparation are not to be seen as the norm.

When writing this dissertation chapter, I am responsible for mentoring first and second-year teachers. This role has notably added a new layer of thinking related to teacher preparation beyond the data collected. In my position, new teachers get the opportunity to share how they are feeling and transparently reflect on their struggles. As a result of my current role and synthesizing this research, wonderings have evolved. I wonder how the environments teacher candidates train within impact their preparedness—for example, completing observations and field experience in an environment that embodies a homogenous racial and cultural student population. While on the other hand, graduating from their teacher preparation program and becoming
employed in a school building where the student racial and cultural demographics vary drastically. My positionality is causing my once simple perception to increase into a complex dynamic filled with wonderings:

- Is it necessary for teacher preparation programs to consider diverse environments where a candidate may be placed?
- Are the opportunities for immersion in diverse environments constrained by educational or university policies?
- Does the geographical location of the training program employ particular considerations for its area?
- How can, if possible, a preparation program aligns its pathway to ensure exposure for multiple environments?

As I ponder these questions, I do not seek to answer them, yet I remain aware that my newfound knowledge has provoked wondering that is critically appropriate. At the same time, the realities presented in the data of this research and my experiences seek to recognize a theme that presents itself as multifaceted. Research conducted by John Hattie (2008) attests that teachers' actions account for approximately 30% of the influences that impact student achievement. However, given variant teaching strategies and collaboration, effectiveness increases. This research helps to emphasize the importance of teacher preparation for all educators despite their pathway to certification. Teacher preparation may need to involve more experiences in the field rather than increased coursework in theory. Allowing teachers to explore their identities and enact theory into practice supports the beginning of building effective teachers. Yet, reimagining teacher preparation programs require consensus amongst the field of education related to defining
the terminology and skills necessary to impact the shifting racial and cultural student population to improve their academic success.

**Defining is Difficult**

Defining requires an individual to explain the meaning of a word clearly and thoroughly. This dissertation research uses racial and cultural competence as defined by researchers Obidah and Teel (2008). Racial and Cultural Competence is a teachers' awareness of power imbalances in classrooms concerning differences related to race (their own and that of others) and culture (Obidah & Teel, 2008, p.3). When posed with defining the term racial and cultural competence, each participant expressed difficulty providing a definition. The data revealed that creating a definition required examples of actions observed through practice rather than defining a phrase. Participants relied on their lived experiences to establish their racial and cultural competence understanding. In each definition supplied by participants, the words awareness, knowledge, and diversity were present. Absent from the descriptions constructed by participants was any reference to the term race.

As the participants worked towards constructing their definition, they articulated the process beginning with individuals having the ability to be open. This level of openness involves a desire to empathize with others, especially their students and families. Rick elaborated on this idea, "just respecting the culture and having the initiative to learn about other people's cultures and backgrounds." It is an initiative that Rick stresses throughout his interview as the foundation for becoming racially and culturally competent. Sandra also stated throughout her interview the importance of getting to know more concerning your school community and students involved in the
process of being open. She communicated the ability to remain vulnerable as a learner when building relationships with her students. Denise understood that teachers needed to have openness to learn more about their students even before a colleague could offer constructive feedback to support their growth of becoming racially and culturally competent. However, the most powerful understanding I gathered when analyzing the participant's constructed meanings was centered around the descriptions of the term diversity.

During her interview, Denise mentioned the term diversity when recounting her disappointment at the PWI (Privately White Institution) she attended during college. She stated that the school's position on diversity was not what she expected to witness based on her understanding of diversity. Denise's opinion was valid and constructed with considerations of her experiences as an emigrant raised in an environment where the community (within and around her city) represented different races and cultures. Engaging in discourse concerning the term diversity prompted me to review the data collection to mention the term. Throughout the in-depth interviews, the term diversity appeared numerous times. Most often used in place of race and culture. Denise explicitly identified race and culture as the terms that explain diversity for her. During the development of this interpretation, I felt my questioning failed to use phrases that effectively gauged the practicing educators. A longing to re-examine word choice evolved within me. I wondered if using a different term could have provoked participants to easily construct their meaning of the term racial and cultural competence.

The reflection on the power of words when seeking to construct meaning felt essential to the findings of this research. Participants' narration allowed me to realize that
defining a term includes a level of subjectivity that considers their lived experiences. However, I did not possess this same line of thinking before implementing this research when I created the research questions and interview guide. During the initial stages of this research, I could not comprehend how the term racial and cultural competence is viewed by practicing educators or even individuals outside of the classroom. I remain curious if the term "diversity" would have been easier to understand for educators when conceptualizing the idea of racial and cultural competence. Diversity enriches the nation because it provides alternative ways to view the world and solve social, economic, and political problems (Banks, 2016). From this perspective, diversity can help eradicate the historical gaps in academic struggles presented amongst student groups when analyzed using racial categories. However, I believe that considering diversity through population differences is not the same as taking actionable steps to engage a diverse population of students.

The U.S. Census 2020 data establishes that an increase in a diverse population has been trending over the past decade (Marks & Rios-Vargas, 2021). The census data helps states understand their specific population to determine the infrastructure and services necessary to support all Americans. The population data will allow states to create education policies. As a result, school districts enact mandates and guidelines to support their growing student populations (Baugh, 2021). Considering the difficulty in defining terms, how does an education agency ensure policy for a diverse student population? Like the participants in this research, education agencies construct definitions for terms that impact classroom practice. When definitions take away subjectivity, disregard lived experience, and seek to ensure meaning amongst the majority, a portion of individuals'
being are not considered. Defining essential terms can lead to confusion in understanding responsibilities and expectations. In this research, the data has shown how confusion leads to misinterpretation of educational policy and the roles and responsibilities of educators.

**Policy Creates Tension**

Based on the participants' voices within this research, Kendall ISD's policies lack understanding of their student population, resulting in tension between the educators and their roles. The interpretation of this section is structured to illustrate the three significant policy tensions in Kendall ISD: acknowledgment of the racial and cultural composition, academics, and behavior. To address the educational policies implemented by the school district, a document review was conducted using Kendall ISD's strategic design plan. The strategic plan was created to assist the district in establishing and revising the policies and expectations that could support academic achievement for all students. These documents represent the goals and progress in the school district spanning five academic school years. The participant interviews were triangulated with the document review. This narrative will not hold to the sequential development of the goals within the strategic plan. Thus, allowing the interpretation to communicate the three significant disconnects between what participants experienced in their daily roles versus the directives and policies provided by campus administrators and district leadership. The closing of each section will provide my insights into the meaning of the findings. Including my perceptions shares my critical examination of the assertions through Triangulation.
Demographic Shift

For five years, Kendall Independent School District (school district for the research site) had the most considerable student population growth compared to 65 other school districts within the state. Participants collectively articulated the lack of support from the school district related to supporting the growing student population's racial and cultural backgrounds. However, Kendall ISD has failed to develop policies that support its student population's racial and cultural composition. Within the strategic plan, goal two seeks to create systems where customized resources would ensure equity in response to the rapidly changing demographics. The document for subgoal 2.1 addresses the progress made towards goal two in which the district communicated they sought to:

Build a districtwide understanding of the rapid growth not only in student enrollment but also to demonstrate the evolving diversity, as well as changes to the overall socio-economic breakdown of Kendall ISD students. Further, it was noted that these rapidly changing demographics could have a direct impact on resource allocation and the district's ability to maintain the level of resources available.

When communicating their "rapidly changing demographics," as stated in goal two, Kendall ISD only references the increasing student population. District leaders wanted to ensure stakeholders were aware of the increased student growth. After reviewing the documents provided to district leadership concerning student growth, there was no reference to the change in the racial and cultural composition that occurred due to the student population growth. In addition, the presentation lacked mention of the word
diversity that participants continuously referred to in their understanding of the student population at the research site. As a result of progress for goal two, four policies were implemented: school needs assessments, expanding specialized programs for high school completion, districtwide multi-bell schedules, and improved bus transportation routes.

Despite the lack of reference to their student population's racial and cultural composition, Kendall ISD promised to remain aware of the shifting demographics by creating a policy to ensure a yearly demographic update. This communicated awareness would aid campuses in completing a needs assessment. The needs assessment allows campus administrators to advocate for additional positions, instructional materials, and resources for their unique student population. While none of the participants spoke of the need for assessments, they firmly believed the district and its policies ineffectively supported the diverse student population at the research site. The data revealed that the main areas of ineffectiveness related to supporting educators and students in Kendall ISD focused on academics and behavior.

The implemented policies for goal two of the strategic plan pursue a universal approach to supporting the student population. Undoubtedly, the focus is system-based, with no contemplation about each student's unique identities in the classroom. The importance of race in relationship to policy is significant. Race information is required for many Federal programs and is critical in making policy decisions, particularly for civil rights (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Given the importance of racial data influence on policy, the discussion of participants' perceptions of the educational policies in their school district was imperative.
As a consequence of only recognizing the growth of the student population, Kendall ISD teachers have struggled. Each participant referenced their experiences (and their colleagues) with grasping effective strategies and resources to support students behaviorally and academically. These two areas were revealed as prevalent tensions amongst participants and policies implemented within Kendall ISD.

**Behavior**

The data analysis highlighted tensions related to behavior and the concerns for disciplining students. Behavior is discussed within goal eight of Kendall ISD's strategic plan (see table 4.1). During Rick's interview, he expressed difficulty with school administrators' failure to support classroom teachers with student discipline. Rick narrated an example of a student who repeatedly used hand gestures representing shooting other students. Despite his opinion that such behavior should warrant a suspension as a severe consequence, the student was subjected to speaking to administrators and the school counselor to address the behavior. A transformative policy derived from the strategic plan focused directly on behavior addressed Rick's concern and created tension demonstrated by his frustration.

While Kendall ISD implemented a policy that provided a holistic approach to meeting the needs of students, Rick believed it also created gaps for students who demonstrate harmful behaviors in the school setting. The district's policy showed consideration for the ineffective discipline typically centered on an unproportionate number of students of color being suspended and expelled from school. Yet, Rick expressed the unbalanced approach to disciplining students who demonstrate behaviors
and supporting students' social and emotional needs. Kendall ISD's discipline policy allowed for services that assist students in the process of comprehending the impacts of their actions (pretending to shoot his classmates using hand gestures). Disciplining students is just one factor for the behavior that occurred in the research site. Denise emphasized her noticing amongst other colleagues:

Some of the teachers don't know what to do or struggle with making relationships. So, behaviors come with that. Some teachers don't want to deal with students, and it becomes a behavior thing versus an academic thing. Students with behaviors just kind of get shifted over to the side. Teachers may not know how to deal with behavior and shut it down to get back on track with the academics. That goes back to the teacher not having a relationship with the kids, you know to say, "well, okay, they're doing this because," or you know, finding out a little bit more behind the behavior. Without the stigma of being a behavior problem, they would get a little further.

In her narration, Denise critically reflected on the idea of teachers being able to utilize their relationship building to understand student behaviors. In addition, she echoed the sentiment of teachers' feelings to investigate why a student is exhibiting behaviors that disrupt instruction. As Denise continued to express her perceptions, she stated, "how can teachers get some experience with how to manage behaviors?". This questioning demonstrates her desire to advocate for learning that engages educators to support the research site's racial and cultural student population.
Behavior management and discipline is a sensitive topic for me. This is mainly due to the wealth of research indicating more students of color being severely disciplined than other student groups. I am a parent of a teenage Black female who attends the district as a student. As a mother, I'm appreciative of the less punitive protocol. My daughter's actions are a learning experience directly connected to her age and developmental processes. Suppose she (or any student for that matter) is penalized severely for behaviors she can't fully grasp the concept of its impacts. Does this create a repetitive cycle of disruptive behaviors? Educational disadvantages tied with the over-policing of schools and zero-tolerance expulsion policies are directly linked to a child's likelihood of later entering the prison system (Rose, 2007). At the same time, I have witnessed teachers misinterpret my daughter's behavior as defiant. However, once I engaged in a line of questioning to inquire about their knowledge of my child outside of the negative behavior they witnessed, the teachers were unable to provide any insight. As a result, I ensured my daughter's individualized education plan (IEP) mandates her classroom teacher to ensure they have private conversations with her for behaviors. This way, my child can articulate her concerns while also allowing the teacher to set attainable expectations. It is lived experiences such as these that help me conceptualize the words and importance narrated by Denise. Behaviors can be misinterpreted depending on the lens through which they are viewed. More importantly, a teacher is not responsible for managing behaviors. It is the role of educators to teach students and help them understand the behaviors that will allow them to be academically successful in school and life. This role can be altered and subjective given the educator's understanding of the student and the family background.
Therefore, policy surrounding behaviors and disciplining must embed training for educators that create a space for educators to reflect on their practice and build their skillsets for building relationships with all their students.

**Academics**

Most of the documents produced within Kendall ISD's strategic plan encompass action steps towards goal one (see table 4.1). This goal ensures all learning environments foster engagement by integrating personalized learning experiences. Each sub-goal establishes a system or program that supports the student population to achieve academic success within goal one. Specifically, sub-goal 1.5 articulates the need to provide a variety of learning experiences that address the cultural backgrounds of all learners. However, this sub-goal was set to be accomplished in the school year 2021-2022. During the writing of this dissertation, no data or action steps were published that supported the district's attempts to accomplish this sub-goal.

Participants expressed significant barriers when questioned about the district supporting the research site's racially and culturally diverse student population. Each participant conveyed in their perceptions that the district was responsible for making the final decision on resources used for instructional purposes. All three educators emphasized the school's library's content as the most significant contributor to considering students' racial and cultural backgrounds at the research site. Rick couldn't grapple with his ability to make his content area of math and science more culturally appropriate for his students using the plentiful resources available by Kendall ISD. Additionally, he believed that the district leadership selected a generalized approach for instructional materials due to the large student population size. On the other hand, Sandra
and Denise vividly described how they encourage teachers to deviate from the required district materials to ensure they are embedding students' background knowledge and community values. Such courageous actions highlight these educators' importance for their students and families.

Each participant spoke directly to their ability to include their students' racial and cultural background knowledge into instruction. In my judgment, racially and culturally competent teachers effectively use the students' personal experiences to connect in learning. These educators use their students' funds of knowledge to interest them in the curriculum, potentially resulting in increased academic achievement. This approach believes that people are competent, they have the knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge (Gonzalez & Moll, 2005). Subsequently, educators are tasked with grading and administering assessments to gather data on the knowledge mastered by students to ensure students' academic growth. Grading and assessments intensify the disagreements amongst the educators and the presented policies.

Rick and Sandra expressed incredible frustration with grading policies created through the focus of goal one in the strategic plan. For Sandra, the unrealistic expectations of assessment outweighed the age-appropriate development. Therefore, she struggled to grade her students, who were still learning to read and write as first graders, against the district curriculum's expectations. Rick voiced his distress with a policy that allowed students to receive reteaching and retesting opportunities on school tests they originally obtained a failing grade. This grading policy produced tension amongst teachers, students, and parents. Teachers expressed concerns about grade inflation and lack of mastery for content due to the grading policy. On the other hand, parents sought
the opportunity to reteach and retest to address the academic struggles their students demonstrated. Consequently, students who initially earned a passing score observed their peers be recognized with the same level of acknowledgment despite being offered multiple attempts at achieving a passing score.

Whereas Kendall ISD has not focused on the composition of the shifting student demographics related to race and culture, they require school administrators and teachers to analyze their academic data on racial categories. Analyzing student data focused on racial groupings was the opposite of what the educators deemed a practical approach to measuring students' academic success. Participants communicated that academic success to them centered on students showing individual growth. Each educator articulated phrases that emphasized celebrating personalized educational goals with their students to achieve academic success while fostering a growth mindset. However, academic success on an individual growth level doesn't translate into school accountability measures for student academic growth. School accountability for Kendall ISD's state aligns academic student progress through the lens of racial/ethnic identification.

Seven racial/ethnic groups are tracked yearly to inform and measure schools' academic success: African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, white, and two or more races. These categories were developed due to a federal mandate from the United States Department of Education (USDE) issued in their guidance to communicate academic data as deemed by the No Child Left Behind Act (Department of Education, 2007, p. 59267). More importantly, the policy helps to explain why the topic of race was at the center of discussion in meetings Rick and Sandra attended with school administrators to analyze student data from campus-based assessments. Kendall ISD was
creating assessments and different systems to measure student academic success, yet failing to provide the resources that will be used to drive the instruction to prepare for the standardized assessments. Therefore, when teachers were questioned about the instructional strategies and resources used to teach specific racial populations of students, the participants were unaware of the purpose in the line of questioning. More so, each participant communicated that they didn't believe their instruction was catered to a specific racial group of students.

Being an educator at this research site, I struggled to comprehend the effectiveness of the grading policy and standardized assessment measures. I witnessed many teachers implement reteaching by simply reviewing the missed questions on the exams. In my opinion, this failed to address the misconceptions that may exist for the student. In addition, I've observed teachers grade students' work based on their subjective views of their instructional practices on the given day of the assignment. My most significant wondering focused on the weakness of the policy when attempting to explain the process as to how educators must implement mandates related to grading. I believed the policy's intent allowed students the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. However, the nonexistent alignment in policy mandate and implementation considerations produced tension in fostering personalized learning experiences for Kendall ISD students.

Before being an educator at the research site, I had never participated in open discussions focused on tracking and analyzing student data from racial categories. I believe this is because my previous settings as a teacher were within a larger metropolitan city within the Midwest, where the student population consisted of predominantly one
racial population (African American). Despite this, I think that focusing on student academic data points while ignoring the complete picture of the child continuously perpetuates a scholarly educational ideology. Sleeter and Stillman (2005) concluded in such a situation where scholarly academic ideology is upheld, knowledge derived from students' experience is subordinated to school knowledge.

Schiro (2013) divided curriculum ideologies into four approaches: The Social Efficiency ideology, the Scholar Academic ideology, the Learner-Centered ideology, and the Social Reconstruction ideology. Within the approach of Scholar Academic Ideology, teachers are mini-scholars who have a deep understanding of their discipline and present it to children. Scholar academics believe that valuable curriculum knowledge is objective rather than subjective in nature (Schiro, 2013). Schiro explains that this belief caused academics who advocate for Scholar Academic ideology to be confident about the reliability of tests, collecting data from assessments, or using their data to make comparisons. From the participants' perceptions and my own experiences, the goals set forth by Kendall ISD district leaders are not supporting a racially and culturally diverse student population. Therefore, the tension between educators and the educational policies created to foster academic success remains consistent. Such strains require educators to ask for forgiveness, not permission, to educate the students. Consequently, policies that fail to recognize and value students individually produce behaviors within the classroom that educators struggle to comprehend.

Absent from the creation of policy in Kendall ISD is the voice of practicing educators. If more educators were allowed to craft policy alongside district leaders, the considerations for students' racial and cultural backgrounds would be relevant in the
strategic plan. The participants communicated that teachers not having a voice at the table to help create policies with the district is an ongoing issue. This research has demonstrated educators use their voice to share lived experiences, express their perceptions about their responsibilities, and communicate their frustrations with the direction of policies that impact their roles. There is a chance to decrease tensions amongst all stakeholders involved in education. The need to extend an invite for educators at the table of creating educational policies is not an isolated call for Kendall ISD and the research site. This research illustrates that in the journey to ensure all students are considered, racial and cultural competence must remain at the forefront of educational policy. This interpretation, alongside the analysis, has produced findings to answer the research questions outlined in this dissertation.

**Research Findings**

Through the process of analysis and interpretation of the stories told by the participants of this study as well as the document review, the following findings represent my new insights and understandings:

- Race and culture are socially constructed perspectives that hold subjectivity and positionality
- Teacher identity knowingly or unknowingly is reflected in classroom practice
- A teacher's racial and cultural identity does not automatically deem them racially and culturally competent
- Lived experiences (authentic engagement) are a more powerful teacher than theory
- Teacher training programs must encompass theory and authentic experiences in a variety of schooling environments to provide teacher candidates with authentic
depictions of their role as an educator; traditional teacher training programs resemble more effective models of preparedness

- Building relationships with students helps to reach beyond racial and cultural backgrounds
- Teachers define, assess, and communicate academic success for students completely different than school district leaders and educational policymakers
- Educational policies lack teacher input and consideration for diverse student populations
- Racial representation matters in curriculum yet are currently nonexistent
- Planned curriculum fails to consider a racially and culturally diverse student population

The above findings represent my newly constructed knowledge and insights. I have engaged in a reflective process with the research questions that framed this dissertation. My reflections will communicate how I have made meaning of the data and interpretation through triangulations with literature. Keeping the research questions at the forefront of the research has allowed me to develop a deepened understanding of the educators and myself.

**Reflective Answers to the Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of three public-school educators, given their understanding of racial and cultural competence in the context of their professional practice and the decision-making of their school district. The data collection included oral histories, in-depth one-on-one interviews, and a document
review of school district policies. The research questions framed and guided my analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of the data.

This section will present a triangulation of the interpretation of the data and dissertation findings with the literature relevant to my dissertation focus. The insights and knowledge gained through this process allow me to reflectively respond to the research questions. The answers will illustrate, through a narrative dialogue, the complexities each question presented. The following research questions guided a multi-level methodology approach blending narrative inquiry and critical race methodology:

1. How do educators construct the meaning of racial and cultural competence?
2. What are these educators' perspectives on how racial and cultural competence can support the academic success of a diverse student population?
3. How do these educators describe and enact the curriculum based on their students' racial and cultural backgrounds?

The answers to the research questions will demonstrate that I have learned (1) defining racial and cultural competence is complex and complicated for the educators in this research as they rely on their self-identification, lack of teacher preparation, and lived experiences to construct meaning (2) the ability to engage in racial and cultural competence requires acknowledgment of awareness of others to improve the academic success of a diverse student population (3) educational policies and curriculum decisions within the school district of the research site creates tension amongst the educators and other stakeholders.
Research Question One: How do educators construct the meaning of racial and cultural competence?

People are naturally self-activated constructors of meaning (Schiro, 2013). Robert Kegan's theory of meaning-making development conceptualizes how human beings make meaning of themselves, others, and their experiences throughout the life span (Ignelzi, 2000). In his book The Evolving Self (1982), Kegan emphasizes his theory demonstrates the consistency in an individual's meaning-making at any particular point in time, such that one understands knowledge or experience is directly related to how one understands others and the self. The educators in the study constructed the meaning of the term racial and cultural competence by reflecting on their self-identification and awareness through childhood upbringings, lived experiences through professional careers, and encounters with others providing a worldview.

Who are they? In their narrations, participants reflected on their identity to understand the terms racial and cultural. Racial and Cultural Competence is a teachers' awareness of power imbalances in classrooms concerning differences related to race (their own and that of others) and culture (Obidah & Teel, 2008). To identify such imbalances, educators must reflect on their racial and cultural identity that positions the way they see themselves and the possible perspectives of others. Participants communicated the need for teachers to embody a sense of awareness to engage in the process of becoming racially and culturally competent. Research supports this sentiment; for example, Robinson (2012, p. 44) stated that:

The aptitude for self-awareness is a precursor to understanding how to learn from one another across cultural boundaries. Recognizing and moving beyond our own
deeply rooted assumptions is crucial because it means we are willing to try on someone else's perspective and accept that it is just as valid as our own. When describing themselves racially and culturally, each participant responded to presenting their identities in ways that demonstrated their ethnic and geographical origins. In their explanations to define racial and cultural competence, participants recognized that it begins with the awareness of oneself.

As the educators defined racial and cultural competence, they repeatedly used "diversity." Participants interchanged the word diversity with the phrase "racial and cultural competence" with comfort, indicating the perception of similarity. The need to replace terms for easier comprehension resonates with assertions presented within the literature review by researcher Frank C. Worrell (2015), who describes culture as being interpreted as race and ethnicity with instances where the terms are used interchangeably. The educators in this study articulated their understandings by referencing words that seemed appropriate in a larger social context versus common language used within the literature. Research highlights that confusion over definition and terms used to discuss concepts and issues of race remains difficult at the theoretical and teaching level (Grant, 2016).

Similarly, Sandra and Rick expressed "not sure the right words to describe racial and cultural competence" while constructing meaning to answer the interview question. Each participant expressed their confidence in knowing what the term meant based on each word's context within the phrase. However, they struggled to combine their understanding as a definition to demonstrate that they understood the term.
I wondered if interchanging the terms allowed participants to speak from a position of a non-critical lens. Perhaps this use of defining may be deemed acceptable across a broader audience. I wondered if each person believed I would offer them the definition of the term to help with their articulation. I'm aware that current discussions within education are being heavily influenced by the words race and culture. Therefore, I wondered if avoiding using the terms allowed the educators to present themselves as neutral participants on a controversial topic. Sometimes vocabulary becomes politicized by assuming a different meaning or value because a small group within society has affixed a positive or negative status with the word (Arendale, 2005). Did participants perceive "diversity" as less controversial than racial and cultural competence? While the question presented didn't explore this, I have considered this idea based on the review of the transcripts. Arendale (2005) asserts:

Rather than promoting the most politically acceptable term, the word choice should be governed by what is the most appropriate phrase that accurately describes the services, target student population, and purpose of the field. If we as educators cannot effectively articulate and communicate these words, we risk being defined by others.

Despite a term being politicized, the true definition must be understood and communicated outside academia. I believe this is an example similar to how Critical Race Theory (CRT) is being widely discussed amongst politics and local school boards nationwide. Within four months in 2021, Fox News mentioned CRT 1,300 times (Gibbons & Ray, 2021). Television networks have discussed CRT in broad contexts, mainly attaching the theory as a basis for implementing racism. Many critics fail to
define the theory using its original roots in research in most instances. Gloria Ladson Billings offers her perspective explaining how CRT is misrepresented in classrooms of the K-12 system as it is most widely used within graduate work (Cornish, 2021).

I believe that emphasis on the words "racial and cultural" is appropriate given the demographics of the student population at the research site. It also acknowledges the uniqueness of the students and staff of color. In the context of education, researcher Ukpokodu (2011) argued that cultural competence involved genuinely believing in (a) a centrality of culture in teaching and learning, (b) an ability to construct a strong racial and cultural identity, (c) a systematic demonstration of positive dispositions toward diversity, and (d) a reflective cultural knowledge base. Educators demonstrated a positive disposition toward diversity when constructing the definition for racial and cultural competence. However, the educators did not explain beyond understanding the awareness of self and considerations of diversity. Their vague descriptions and my engagement in discussions with race and culture in graduate coursework ignited my curiosity. I wondered how, if at all, their teacher preparation programs engaged them in conversations about race and culture.

Training. Pathways to becoming a certified education are either traditional or alternative. Traditional teacher programs typically serve undergraduate students leading to certification and a bachelor's degree. On the other hand, alternative certification programs allow those without teaching certifications to switch careers and expedite entry into K-12 classrooms (Whitford et al., 2017). Alternative programs seek to attract talent to education, allowing individuals the opportunity to bring their expertise from other fields into education. The participants within this research obtained their certifications through
traditional programs (Rick and Sandra) and alternative programs (Denise). Despite the preparation program completed, each educator thoroughly highlighted the lack of training to understand the magnitude of their responsibilities to a diverse student population. Research on preparedness for teachers indicates that sixty-two percent of all new teachers say they were unprepared for the classroom after they graduated from their teacher preparation program (NCTE, 2010). The high percentage of unprepared teacher candidates is alarming. It is reflected in difficulty demonstrated by participants within this research as they attempted to construct meaning of racial and cultural competence. I believe the absence of conversations of race and culture within teacher preparation programs disregards the realities educators will encounter within diverse classrooms.

Cultural competence is a developmental process that requires the continual acquisition of knowledge, developing new and more advanced skills, and ongoing self-evaluation of progress (Diller & Moule, 2005). While the process begins with self-reflection, I believe that teacher preparation programs should be the formal environment to initiate this process. It's through training that we learn our roles and responsibilities. Researchers Davis & Peck (2020) assert that teacher preparation programs that establish strategic organizational supports for collaborative data-use practices show significant trends in positive program outcomes from their teacher candidates. These outcomes referenced in my interpretation were experienced by my peers and me when graduating from our traditional preparation program. However, too many candidates still lack access to rigorous and meaningful clinical experiences. Denise and Rick were unable to articulate clinical placements before becoming a teacher of record. Clinical placements allow for teachers-in-training to have the opportunity to learn and practice skills under
the supervision of master teachers before their student teaching (Kilminster & Jolly, 2000). However, Sandra highlighted her encounters with knowledgeable professors that helped to give her appreciation for her African American students. She elaborated on how discussions with her professor provided her with awareness surrounding the historical injustices placed on African Americans. Sandra utilized the transfer of knowledge from her professor's expertise to improve the instruction and relationships with her African American students. By hiring knowledgeable professors, Sandra's preparation program allowed her to engage in the knowledge that advanced her skills as an educator. Through gaining the historical knowledge and utilizing it to reach her students, Sandra demonstrated how she participates in being racially and culturally competent.

The process of racial and cultural competence begins with the educator. Ensuring teacher candidates engage in classroom activities that allow their biases to become explicit will enable them to acknowledge, challenge, and reflect upon this new awareness and consider how it informs their cultural humility (Brown et al., 2016). Having encountered a journey through my educational preparation programs that allowed me to address and challenge aspects of race and culture elevated my awareness of the education field. Darling-Hammond (2000) suggests that teacher preparation programs embed coursework that allows candidates and teachers to understand their own identities and become culturally responsive teachers. By embodying a culturally responsive approach into my practice, similar to Sandra, I am able to engage with my students in families from the position of a learner. This engagement bridges the acquired knowledge with instructional practice. Proper teacher preparation training has supported the journey to advocate for students and their families ensuring the experience of schooling can enhance
their lives. Without adequate awareness of myself and preparation from an effective teacher training program, I'm unable to recognize racial and cultural competence in the developmental progress of others and me.

**Experiences.** Gallavan (2011) described cultural competence as a process of understanding and accepting oneself, one another, and all of society, both locally and globally. In their explanations, each participant provided examples of actions witnessed in the practice of others to describe racial and cultural competence. The observations made in professional environments helped them construct understanding to make meaning. The participant's attempts at defining racial and cultural competence can be viewed through the lens of constructivism. Constructivism theory is based on the premise of cognition, in which people construct their understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). The educators in this research developed aspects of racial and cultural competence through their practice and that of other educators. Constructivists refer to Jean Piaget as "the great pioneer of the constructivist theory of knowing" (von Glasersfeld, 1990). According to Piaget, all development emerges from action; that is to say, individuals construct and reconstruct their knowledge of the world due to interactions with the environment. Knowledge is simply the expertise and skills acquired over time through different experiences, situations, and education.

A cultural competence approach offers practical and comprehensive guidelines for teacher educators, fostering their students' abilities to teach children from a broad range of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds (Deardorff, 2009;
Such an approach is embedded in preservice candidates' coursework, and practicing educators' professional development can support the diverse student population in today's schools. My experience with teacher preparation and advanced studies has allowed me to explore literature focused on culture and race. Similar to the educators in this research, being afforded the opportunity to observe other educators assists me in defining racial and cultural competence. However, presenting the definition of racial and cultural competence as defined by literature is essential for preservice teachers and practicing educators.

**Research Question Two:** *What are these educators' perspectives on how racial and cultural competence can support the academic success of a diverse student population?*

In the opening vignette of this research, I narrated a particular moment during my second year as a teacher of record in which a student was placed in my classroom after he was put out of his classroom during a standardized assessment. This vignette illustrated the passion and curiosity which grounded the research questions developed. Specifically, question number two was derived from questioning the ability of my colleagues and myself to build cross-cultural relationships with students that ultimately resulted in effective classroom management. For my administration team and school security guards, building relationships was a strength that teachers who lacked classroom management did not possess. As a result, my classroom became the intervention space along a student's route before being sent to the dean of students. In addition, I questioned my racial identity as being seen as a connection for which could have led administrators and staff to believe I was better at supporting students of color into achieving academic success because I was an educator of color. However, through literature and the voices shared...
through the participants' stories in this research, I became aware that this way of thinking referenced what researchers indicated as racial matching. *Racial matching* occurs when students receive instruction from educators of the same ethnicity or racial background as their students (Gershenson, 2019). However, racial and cultural competence is not acquired simply by racial matching.

No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Heyward (2004) explains that individuals typically identify with a range of social or cultural groups, and those cultural groups may overlap. Like the educators within this research, each identified with a different racial and cultural identification. Achinstein and Aguirre (2008) challenged the assumption that teachers of color should have a cultural match with their students. Their study critically looks at the experiences of new teachers of color, focusing on socio-cultural challenges. The data provided convincing evidence that students question cultural identifications and thus deemed novice teachers of color as socially suspect. In the opening vignette, the student described characteristics of the teacher he considered "worthy" of applying his efforts for her class. In his description, he never referenced their either teacher's race. Yet, he described the skill set that each teacher possessed that allowed them to build relationships with their students and foster the determination to achieve academic success. Despite the racial and cultural identification of the teachers who participated in this dissertation research, their relationships with students expressed not their cultural and racial identities but their professional competence.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed the benefits of relationships building with students, which helped develop their academic success. During this relationship-building
process, the educators allowed themselves to learn about their students' racial and cultural backgrounds. Sandra described how she could connect with students, and their culture easily supports her instruction as the students become more engrossed in what she is presenting. Denise also explained how speaking to the similarities of her students gains their attention to view her as "cool." She believed being viewed as excellent with her students supported her relationship building. Thus, she used the relationships to encourage students to become comfortable in the learning environment during academic interventions. Ultimately, the information each educator gathered about their students fostered relationships that opened them and their students' to achieving academic success. Researchers Bryk and Schneider (2003) conducted a case study to analyze student and teacher relationships. After engaging in a 10-year study, findings revealed a connection between trust and student learning. Bryk and Schneider’s research proved that trust is conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain activities necessary to affect productivity for success. Therefore, the relationship-building participants engaged in allowed them to impact their students' academic achievement.

Strong teacher-student relationships are associated in both the short- and long-term with improvements on practically every measure schools care about: higher student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates (Sparks, 2019). While analyzing student data, Rick and Sandra experienced growth in academic success amongst their African American student population. Researcher Wells-Rivers (2011) concluded that students from non-dominant cultures showed steady growth academically as their teachers developed more incredible skills in cultural competence. Based on the study, cultural awareness and appreciation
allow students and their families to partner with teachers to meet academic goals. Building relationships with students allowed these educators to develop their racial and cultural competence while also improving the academic success of their student population. Through strengthening relationships with students, I understand that teachers can also close educational gaps.

**Research Question Three:** *How do these educators describe and enact the curriculum based on their students' racial and cultural backgrounds?*

Research question three provided the ability to explore curriculum and instruction through the topic of racial and cultural competence with two lenses. The educators were asked to reflect on how they considered their student population when planning and implementing instruction from the curriculum. In addition, educators were asked to share how the school district's curriculum considered the racial and cultural backgrounds of the student population at the research site. Stark differences were found related to the educators versus the school district's ability to contemplate the racial and cultural student population when making decisions with the curriculum. The answer to question three exemplified the educators' tensions and frustrations against policy development (vision and goals) and implementation (realities).

The in-depth interviews and document review conducted in this research indicated two different viewpoints of curriculum as aligned by literature amongst educators and district leadership. The school district of Kendall ISD offered its schools a curriculum plan. Research Lunenburg (2011) describes a *curriculum plan:*

A system for both decision-making and action with respect to curriculum functions directed at a specified population. Thus, a curriculum plan has three
primary functions: to produce a curriculum for an identifiable population, to implement the curriculum in a specific school, and to appraise the effectiveness of the curriculum developed.

Kendall ISD creates a curriculum plan for each subject area taught for its student population. Each educator within the district must implement the plan under the direction of their instructional coordinators and campus administrators. Through expectations set by the school district, students would be assessed on the effectiveness of knowledge resulting from the instruction.

However, when the educators discussed approaching the curriculum plan to implement instruction, they emphasized curriculum as objectives. In this way of viewing curriculum, the action classifies educational objectives descriptive of the kinds of behavior that educators seek from students in schools (Lunenburg, 2011). Educators provided criticism with the curriculum plan stating it presented contradictions to the wording listed in the visionary strategic plan for Kendall ISD: “Provide a variety of learning experiences that address distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds of all learners”.

When explicitly asked about the curriculum provided by the school district, participants expressed their disbelief that consideration for their student population was apparent. Participants explained how they believed district leaders failed to consider students' racial and cultural aspects when selecting the instructional materials and assessments. The district-approved curriculum approached instruction utilizing a Scholarly Academic Ideology, providing school knowledge in a sequential progression. Ultimately, student knowledge and instruction effectiveness are assessed using a
standardized test at the end of the school year. Data from standardized tests are summarized giving racial/ethnic categories. This tension also connects to the opening vignette that caused the student who demonstrated disruptive behaviors to be placed in my class. The student was frustrated with an assessment used in the organization that allowed teachers, administrators, and other network stakeholders to gather preliminary student progress data before the end-of-year standardized test. The assessment provided questioning on content for which students had not received instruction, and therefore the student felt incompetent when presented with the material. In this particular scenario, I provided a different lens for the student by explaining to him the true objective of the assessment. As a result, the student comprehended that the standardized test was not a reflection of what he knew but a way for individuals to gauge the effectiveness of the instruction and students' learning in his teacher's classroom. I explained this in such a manner as to support the student in making sense of the situation. However, I was reminded at that moment, and throughout this research, that policy creates and continuously produces the same stressful reactions and behaviors the student demonstrated within educators.

State and local mandates require teachers to provide specific types of instruction based on the planned curriculum. The same policies then attempt to mandate multiple tests to collect data, tracking if the goals are being met (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2010). Imagine for a second if the focus on standardized assessments were taken out of the realm of education. The stress experienced by teachers and students could be minimized, and the scenario presented in the opening chapter of this dissertation could have been avoided. The flexibility of curriculum and implementation will allow teachers to shift to a
student-centered approach to learning. The concept of student-centered learning brings the classroom and students to life (Overby, 2011). Ultimately, all students from racial and cultural backgrounds would be considered. Nevertheless, what does academic support for these diverse student populations look like for the educators in this research?

When questioned on the educators' steps to consider their racially and culturally diverse student population, participants highlighted their ability to use their students' background knowledge to bridge their understanding of the curriculum. Researchers have emphasized the key to teaching a diverse population is the belief that all students come to school equipped and prepared with essential experiences and fundamental knowledge (Krasnoff, 2016). The educators within this research embodied this same belief to enact the curriculum. In addition, each participant identified the school library as providing books to represent students. Sandra advocated for teachers to "plan different lessons for students beyond what the district provides to support, including more diverse and relevant individuals that students can connect to during the social studies." Participants described their attempts to change the curriculum implementing characteristics of Multicultural Education. Multicultural Education refers to how all dimensions and aspects of schooling address the needs and talents of culturally diverse populations to ensure equity and social justice for all (Grant, 2012). In her ability to consider her students, Sandra selected different reading materials that students would value. Thus, students can connect to the instruction and appreciate the presented content. How Sandra implements such practices and strategies is considered adequate by proponents of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). Ladson-Billings (2014) emphasizes:
CRP represents educators who (a) promote understandings about the fluidity of culture and ways of honoring culture as a means of enhancing knowledge; (b) not only believe that students can achieve academic success but also work to ensure students experience intellectual growth based on their instruction; (c) actively engage in sociopolitical consciousness for students to ensure they can engage with, explore, and solve issues impacting their realities.

Educational policy within the school district denying the acknowledgment of the racial and cultural aspects of the student population is reflective in their lack of curriculum selection, forcing educators to risk their careers to advocate for their students. Sandra demonstrates that deciding to stray from the district-provided curriculum requires teachers to ask for forgiveness, not permission.

The tension in the political reality of education is overwhelming teachers and students. Living the truths of this tension furthermore allows me to reflect on my positionality that transcended during this research process. I've relocated states, school districts and engaged in a more diverse student population. Yet, I continuously am submerged in similar institutional cultures that though they appear different on the outer, have revealed themselves through this research. My ability to critically look at environments reveals similarities within the larger political climate to enforce testing mandates to assess the effectiveness of teachers. Assessment is being used as a stronghold rooted institutional culture for upholding the dominant culture (White culture) within the research despite dramatic shifts in the diverse student population. In my opinion, the research site is not as rigid with institutional culture as in my previous
experience with the turnaround network. However, through a specific curriculum, a stronghold remains present on maintaining the status quo by silencing the voices of the students of color. Teachers informed by a critical epistemology refuse to accept standardized, externally developed, scripted curricula that appeal to teacher and student ability (Kincheloe, 2008). Therefore, I have chosen, similar to Sandra, to steer in a different direction of the curriculum plan. In these moments, I place the needs of my students to think critically about material beyond the objectives provided for behavior and cognitive compliance of the curriculum. With conflict ensuing between policy and actualities of practice for teachers, the need to transform the field of education is now.

Following, I provide the study's validity, trustworthiness, and limitations. The concluding sections of the chapter extend recommendations, implications, and my reflection on this journey.

**Validity and Trustworthiness**

Efron and Ravid (2020) clarify the term validity as the degree to which the study, the data collection tools, and the interpretation of data accurately represent the issue being investigated. In addition, they note qualitative researchers prefer the term trustworthiness to describe the kind of data used in qualitative inquiry.

To strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of this dissertation study and its findings, I have used the following benchmarks (Creswell, 2014; Galvan, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2021; Maxwell, 2013): triangulation, member checking, and thick descriptions.

**Researcher bias.** It was important for me to recognize my positionality within this research as it influences how it was conducted and its impact on its findings (Rowe,
2014). I am an educator employed at the research site. Before their selection as participants, I had never engaged with any of the educators in this study. Given my position, it was essential to ensure trustworthiness and validity were at the core of this research. Presenting my personal biases and reflections was a way to enhance the trustworthiness of this study (Efron and Ravid, 2013). I openly recognize my subjectivity and share my personal and professional involvement with the topic. Therefore, I monitored my subjectivity and maintained it through self-reflection.

**Research Process and Procedures**

In each phase of this study, I described the research process and procedures explicitly and in detail. My goal was to demonstrate that the research methodology and design were rationally chosen, as were the inquiry process, such as the choice of participants, the data collection, and analysis tools.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity and validity of inferences and insights researchers draw from the data (Schwandt, 2001). This research employed a multi-level methodology approach blending narrative inquiry and critical race methodology. Within this study, the use of in-depth interviews, oral histories, and document reviews supported the Triangulation necessary to support trustworthiness and credibility. I triangulated the data using Triangulation in qualitative research, reflecting multiple data collection and analysis methods for establishing the validity of my findings and insights. I triangulated the different stories related by the participants as well as compared and contrasted their daily teaching experiences with the official curriculum developed for the research setting. Additionally, I triangulated my findings and insights with literature published on the topic at the center of this research dissertation.
**Member checking.** After transcribing the interviews, participants were given a copy of transcripts to support member checking. Member checking is a "way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants' experiences" (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). For two weeks, participants were offered the opportunity to provide any concerns and feedback with the transcripts. No participants reported any misrepresented information presented on the transcripts.

**Thick description.** Through narrative inquiry, educators were able to present their perspectives focusing on storytelling. Within each of the dissertation chapters, a thick description supported the stories provided through the data collection. Thick description refers to a detailed and rich account of the research context and the participants, and a presentation of the participants' perspectives in their own words (Efron & Ravid, 2020). My use of thick description throughout the data analysis and interpretation provided multiple quotations are interwoven throughout the narrative that authentically captured the participants' points of view and lived experience. An additional purpose of thick, rich description identified by Creswell and Miller (2000) is to draw the reader more closely into the story to evoke feelings for and a sense of connection with the participants in the study. The development of effective strategies implemented in this research worked to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

**Implications**

Given the rapidly growing racial and cultural student population in public schools today, the need for racial and cultural competence is essential to advance the field. This study opens up paths to future research focused on (1) redesigning teacher preparation programs for preservice teachers, (2) developing professional development for practicing
educators, and (3) advocating for teacher voice within the decision-making process of educational policies. The implications offered are a result of my acquired knowledge given the interpretation and findings of this study.

Regardless of the pathway candidates embark on to gain teacher certification (traditional or alternative), proper preparation is the bridge each preservice educator travels. After engaging in this research, I assert teacher preparation programs must embed a balance of theory (coursework) and practice (clinical placements) to allow teacher candidates to consider the actualities of their career responsibilities. Developing highly effective educators requires more than standardized state exams incorporating generalized scenarios.

Through coursework, candidates are provided with theory to help build the historical background of schooling. However, investment in teacher preparation programs allows education schools to redesign their vision, frameworks, and procedures with candidate outcomes in mind. These changes will meet the needs of the diverse student populations that preservice teachers will encounter—incorporating a variety of lenses in the development of theory and allowing candidates safe spaces to reflect on their own racial and cultural identities. Awareness of oneself cultivates the ability for individuals to respect others' racial and cultural backgrounds avoiding stereotypes. In addition, programs must employ multiple clinical placement opportunities to engage preservice candidates in diverse educational settings. Such opportunities should occur before student teaching. Field opportunities within schools allow teacher candidates to receive experience implementing theory while being coached by mastered educators from the
preparation program. Restructuring teacher preparation programs can progressively initiate the developmental process of racial and cultural competence.

Another implication to advance the findings of this research seeks investment for current teachers and staff through professional development. Professional development for educators and staff within school districts catered to racial and cultural competence can deepen understanding. Educators can consider the dynamics that foster respect amongst diverse environments through discussions. Ensuring that each individual within a school can effectively work across cultures supports the trust and allows for a relationship. Based on the participants' perceptions in this study, building relationships is at the core of developing connectedness with others. Many educators can use these skills to establish a good rapport with diverse student populations to support academic success.

Finally, based on the tension between policy and the realities of the educators in this study, I'm suggesting a new approach to the process of educational policies. Policy development and implementation at the federal, state, and local for the field of education must include the voice and knowledge of teachers. Advocating for teacher voice within the decision-making process allows for authentic realities to be contemplated in practice. While educators are the only individuals who implement the curriculum, they are more often absent in selecting and evaluating the effectiveness of the planned curriculum given the racial and cultural backgrounds of their student population. Furthermore, including educators of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds within these decision-making processes assists in giving voice to those who are silenced in the dominant White culture that perpetuates the field of education in the United States. Developing racial and cultural competence requires time, effort, and altering mindsets. The findings and interpretations
of this research have provided suggestions that emphasize the significance of racial and cultural competence in education from teachers' perspectives.

**Limitations**

I acknowledge limitations placed on this research and its findings. The study consisted of a small sample size of three educators. A larger sample of teachers may have yielded more insights into how teachers perceive the topic of racial and cultural competence in practice. Another limitation within the study was excluding the student and teacher observations. Due to the global pandemic that covered the timeline of this research, observations were not permissible given the health precautions for classrooms to avoid the spread of COVID-19. Engaging in classroom observations could have added a multifaceted perspective of the participants in this research focused on their practice in action.

**Reflections**

"Every day you learn something new, only if you open your eyes and ears to receive it."

-D.M.

Throughout this research journey, I have changed my age, spiritual and emotional healing, professional career, and geographical location. I've spent the last six years of my life traveling along with my doctoral program with the hope of gathering the words and knowledge that would bring a voice to the experiences I encountered. I have experienced the loss of family members, friends, and relationships along this process. I have had sleepless nights and questioned my strength to endure through a process so rigorous. Nevertheless, the research was always able to heal me during uncertain times and moments of confusion.
The most significant impact this research has given me was building bridges with others who share the same aspirations and passion for improving education. While I once was accustomed to looking at the external of an individual and subconsciously questioning aspects of their life, I've learned that nothing can tell the story of a person better than their narration. This research has left me with hope for what is next to come in the evolving world of education.

As I reflect on the current state of education in America, I'm grateful to possess a broader lens to view political travesties impacting the field. However, it is a result of the knowledge provided in my coursework and professors that continues to ignite my advocacy. I shall continue on my journey of using research to advocate for the voices of the silenced.
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Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear prospective participant:

You are invited to be part of a qualitative research project, *Racial and Cultural Competence through the Eyes of Public-School Educators*, conducted by Laquita McMillion, a doctoral candidate at National Louis University. The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences of public-school educators in their process of racial and cultural competence in the content of their classroom practice. The following questions guide this research:

1. How do educators construct the meaning of racial and cultural competence?
2. What are these educators’ perspectives on how racial and cultural competence can support the academic success of a diverse student population?
3. How do these educators describe and enact the curriculum based on their students' racial and cultural backgrounds?

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and you can withdraw from it at any time with no penalty to you. The study does not have any known or potential risks. You are invited to participate in three individual semi-structured qualitative interviews that may last approximately 45 min at a location of your choice. You will be asked to respond to a series of questions pertaining to your life history, practice as an educator, and policy considerations. The interview will be audio- and/or video-recorded (pending your consent) and transcribed. The transcription of the interview will be presented to you for verification of accuracy.

For confidentiality purposes, the interview transcripts and all files pertaining to your participation in this study will be stored on an encrypted data hard drive that requires a secure password for which Laquita McMillion will only have access.
Upon request, you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. You will be tendered a copy of your signed consent form. Please acknowledge with your signatures below your consent to participate in this study.

In the event that you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Laquita McMillion, lmcmillion@my.nl.edu, (708) 776-3909. If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that the researcher has not addressed, you may contact the dissertation chair Sara Efron, sefron@nl.edu, or the chair of NLU’s Institutional Research Board: Dr. Shaunti Knauth; email: Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu; phone: (312) 261-3526.

Thank you,
Laquita McMillion

I consent to participate in this study:

Participant’s Name (first and last): ________________________________________

Participant’s Signature: ________________________________________________

Date: ____________________________
Appendix B
Sample District Curriculum Plan Summary for English Language Arts 4th grade

Class/Course: 4th grade Literacy   Unit 2: Diving into Fiction

Unit Summary: This unit is just as the title explains—a deep dive into fiction. Students are reading volumes in reading workshop while diving deep into interpreting characters. Alongside the work of reading workshop students are revving up for revving up for fiction writing with a quick review of personal narrative “true trouble stories” before jumping into writing a series of short fiction stories. Please note that although our unit plan is a comprehensive literacy plan encompassing all aspects of literacy it is the expectation that teaching will occur through distinct reading and writing workshops. The workshops are identified portions of your literacy block.

Reading: We begin our first official unit of fourth grade with Interpreting Characters: The Heart of the Story. The purpose of this unit is to teach students the specific skills to interact with narrative text in order to analyze, make inferences, summarize, make connections and draw conclusions about the author’s purpose. The heart of any good story is the character. A major focus is to analyze characters, their interactions, relationships and changes they undergo. They will learn to grow ideas about characters and begin tracking their thoughts through post-it notes and reading responses. Readers learn to build substantial ideas that are grounded in evidence. This unit has three bends:
Bend I: Establishing a Reading Life
Bend II: Thinking Deeply about Characters
Bend III: Building Interpretations.

Writing: This unit begins with Up the Ladder Accessing Grades 3-6 Narrative Units of Study for bends one and two, allowing the students to rev up their narrative writing. After two bends, it then moves into The Arc of the Story: Writing Realistic Fiction, for bends one and two. Students will set up their writing notebooks, learn procedures, etc. The purpose of this unit is for students to write a fictional story that builds the plot to a climax and contains details about the character and the setting. This unit has three bends:
Bend I: Writing and Revising True Trouble Stories
Bend II: Writing a Series of Short Fiction Stories
Bend III: Creating and Developing Characters that Feel Real
Bend II: Drafting and Revising with an Eye Toward Believability

Word Study: Students will explore a conceptual way of thinking about how to read, understand, and spell words. Students will transfer their knowledge of words into reading and writing. Word Study has been realigned to the new ELAR TEKS. For more information on cycles, scope & sequence, fully-developed lessons, and assessments; see the 4th Grade Interactive Unit Plans.

Grammar: Grammar is primarily taught during writing workshop in the context of the students’ own writing. In addition to this we have selected mini lessons from Conventions and Craft Grade 4 by Linda Hoyt. Instruction will consist of 4-5-week cycles that incorporate a Picture Talk, lessons from Scholastic Conventions & Craft Grade 4 by Linda Hoyt, and prescriptive lessons all aligned to the TEKS and the Units of Study in Writing. For more information on Picture Talks, scope & sequence, fully-developed lessons, and assessments; see the 4th Grade Interactive Unit Plans.

Enduring Understandings
• Prior knowledge, including reading and life experiences, shapes how readers make connections and interact
- Effective readers use appropriate comprehension strategies, as needed, to construct meaning and expand vocabulary.
- Proficient readers make inferences and draw conclusions using relevant evidence from text to support their thinking.
- Proficient readers recognize how an author’s use of devices, structures, language, and images construct and convey meaning.
- Writing is a reflective process used to solve problems, explore issues, construct questions, and address inquiry.
- Writing is a recursive process that involves planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.
- Writers analyze various models of texts to determine the effective elements of writing.
- The genre, purpose, and audience dictate the structure of the written composition.
- Writers choose words, ideas, devices, and information/evidence to elicit an intended response from the audience.

### Word Study

- Proper oral and written conventions promote fluency of communication.
- The appropriateness of language is determined by the context in which it is used.
- Conventional spelling and mechanics promote common understanding.
## Appendix C

### Rick’s Sample Lesson Plan

| Grade/Subject: | Unit Number & Title: Place Value  
Primary T-TESS Standard 1.1 |
|----------------|----------------------------------|
| **Week of:** August 31 - Sept. 4 | TEKS: 4.2C  
Primary T-TESS Standard 1.1 |

#### Monday August 31

| Mastery Objective:  
*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.1*  
(What will the students know and be able to do by the end of this lesson?) | Criteria for Success:  
*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.2*  
(What are the features of an ideal product and the threshold for mastery) | Assessment:  
*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.2*  
(How will students demonstrate mastery of the objective?) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Students will be able to accurately compare and order numbers up to one billion | To show mastery a student must accurately compare two or more multi-digit whole numbers using the correct comparison symbols | Students will complete a performance task in which they will compare 4 numbers up to the hundred millions  
SW also completes an exit ticket consisting of 4 comparison questions. |

### Key Conceptual Understandings:  
(What key ideas do students need to take away from today’s lessons?)

- Place value is the value of a digit according to its place in a number  
- Place value can be used to help decide if a number is greater than or less than another number

### Possible Student Misunderstandings to watch out for:

- Students may think they need to start in the smallest place  
- Misuse of comparison symbols  
- Not recognizing how to use comparison symbols when comparing more than two numbers in a group

| Lesson Component  
*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.1* | TEK Aligned Quality Question  
*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.4* | Time stamp  
*Primary T-TESS standard 1.1* |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| **Opener**  
*Read Aloud/ Number Talk* | **Reasoning Routine:** How many staples in one strip?  
*(Estimation practice)* | 5-10 min |
| **Mini Lesson** | The mini-lesson will be a teacher recorded lesson providing students with strategies and examples for comparing and ordering whole numbers.  
TW show | 10-15 min |
students how to line numbers up, compare places, and choose the correct comparison symbol.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conferring/ Independent</td>
<td>Independent practice is a performance task (4.2C). SW record answers in a notebook.</td>
<td>20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stations/Small Group</td>
<td>Planned separately</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closer</td>
<td>4 question exit ticket</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Materials Needed:** Notebook, place value chart

*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.4*
### Appendix D

**Sandra’s Sample Lesson Plan**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade/Subject: 1st/Math</th>
<th>Unit Number &amp; Title: Addition and Subtraction to 10 (Module 1) Making 10 Using Number Bonds</th>
<th>Primary T-TESS Standard 1.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week of: 9/28-10/2</td>
<td>TEKS: 1.3 ABCD/1.5 DF Primary T-TESS Standard 1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Monday**

#### Mastery Objective: (teaching point)
*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.1 (What will the students know and be able to do by the end of this lesson?)*

SW use known pairs of addends that make 10 to determine a missing addend (MIP 159)

**Criteria for Success: (check for understanding)**
*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.2 (What are the features of an ideal product and the threshold for mastery)*

Observing students using known pairs (2 colored counting manipulatives) to make ten.

**Assessment: (share)**
*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.2 (How will students demonstrate mastery of the objective?)*

Not one size fits all. Can include: picture, rubric, etc.

Seesaw:

[Link to save to Seesaw](#)

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**Key Conceptual Understandings:** (What key ideas do students need to take away from today’s lessons?)

*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.2*

1. **Combinations of known pairs can make ten.**

**Possible Student Misunderstandings to watch out for:**

*Primary T-TESS Standard 1.2, 1.4 (Example: interest vs. ability)*

1. **Students might over apply counting forwards past 10**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Component</th>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>TEK Aligned Quality Question</th>
<th>Time stamp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opener</strong></td>
<td><strong>Number line on a hundred line-how to hop</strong></td>
<td><strong>How many Fireflies did you see?</strong></td>
<td><strong>5-10 min</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Then if time permits,</strong></td>
<td><strong>How do you know?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>FireFly Flash</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mini Lesson</strong></td>
<td><strong>TW guide students with a math problem to start: show apple problem to the right. Tell them there were 7 apples in the tree for the farmer to pick and then he saw two more! How many apples does he have now?</strong></td>
<td><strong>What number goes with ___ to make 10?</strong></td>
<td><strong>10-15 min</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy math charts file</strong></td>
<td><strong>TW solve the problem with him! All we need to do is combine the two numbers together or add them!</strong></td>
<td><strong>How many more are needed to make 10?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Before, we talk about our TOOL of the day, I would like for us to create an anchor chart together! TW create an anchor chart to the right!</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>**<strong>Make sure to not teach key words!! Just think of synonyms for addition. join, combine, compose!</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>TW show how to use number bond. with the apple question from above. Sometimes it helps to have them in concrete form, in your hands! Tw show 7 unifix cubes on one side and 2 more on the other side. Then show them how you push them up to find the whole or total! Show one more example and then move to guided practice showing them the number bond.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stations/Small Group</strong></td>
<td><strong>Spin &amp; Make Ten</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>50 min</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closer Formative Assessment</td>
<td>Seesaw Activity</td>
<td>What numbers do you see? What number does it make when you put them together?</td>
<td>5 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Materials Needed:
Primary T-TESS Standard 1.4
Appendix E  
Denise’s Sample Lesson Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade/Subject: 5th grade / Science</th>
<th>Unit Number &amp; Title: Unit 3- Earth and Space: Earth’s Surface &amp; Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week of: Nov 16-20</td>
<td>TEKS: 5.7B (R) recognize how landforms such as deltas, canyons, and sand dunes are the result of changes to Earth’s surface by wind, water, or ice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I can describe and explain changes to the Earth’s surface resulting in landforms: • Deltas • Canyons • Sand dunes 5.7B

I can describe how these changes occur due to: • Water • Wind • Ice 5.7B

**Content Builder:** The student knows Earth’s surface is constantly changing and consists of useful resources. Students make connections from previous grade-level learning of observing and identifying slow changes to Earth’s surface caused by weathering, erosion, and deposition from water, wind, and ice. As well as examining properties of soils and recording how soils are formed by weathering of rock and the decomposition of plant and animal remains. Students also investigated rapid changes in Earth’s surface. They will use their background knowledge of these concepts to understand how weathering, erosion, and deposition change the shape of the Earth’s surface.

**Key Conceptual Understandings:** (What key ideas do students need to take away from today’s lessons?)

Students need to understand how weathering, erosion, and deposition play a central role in changing the shape of the Earth’s surface, and that wind, water, and ice are the causes of those changes. Students may struggle unless they directly see the changes that can occur. Providing opportunities for students to investigate through hands-on models, labs, and demonstrations can help build conceptual understandings of landform formation. When you teach this concept, remember to: • Provide hands-on investigations or models that demonstrate the process of how landforms are created. Students should make connections to real-world applications. • Select activities in which students analyze photographs of landforms and determine what process led to its formation. • Vary visuals (e.g., models, diagrams, and photographs) to connect hands-on learning to stimuli.

**Possible Student Misunderstandings to watch out for:** (Lead4ward Field Guide)

Students may make the following mistakes: • Not differentiating among weathering, erosion, and deposition • Misunderstanding how wind, water, and ice shape landforms • Being unable to identify the landform in a photograph and determine what process or processes (weathering, erosion, deposition) occurred • Rationalizing what occurred in an abstract model and not connecting it to real-world landforms
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Component</th>
<th>Asynchronous/Synchronous Lessons</th>
<th>TEK Aligned Quality Question</th>
<th>Time stamp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary T-TESS Standard 1.1</td>
<td><strong>5.7B STEMSCOPES- Changes to Land</strong></td>
<td>Primary T-TESS Standard 1.4</td>
<td>Prime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage</td>
<td><strong>Stemscopes 5.7B (Engage)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>45 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Pre-assessment</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Day 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Picture Vocabulary</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Explainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Weathering Anchor Chart</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Powerpoint Weathering Erosion and Deposition (focus on weathering) <a href="https://www.slideshare.net/MMoiraWhitehouse/weathering-erosion-and-depositioneasier">https://www.slideshare.net/MMoiraWhitehouse/weathering-erosion-and-depositioneasier</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td><strong>MATH District Learning Assessment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>45 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Day 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect on</td>
<td><strong>STEMSCOPES- Changes to Land</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>45 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td><strong>Stemscopes 5.7B - (ENGAGE) EXPLAIN</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Day 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weathering <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxmAJMjJ5Nk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxmAJMjJ5Nk</a></td>
<td></td>
<td>Explainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* What’s My Story (need student handout and student reference sheet found under engage Teacher Instructions)*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differentiation: Students will either write or record their information giving a minimum of 2 facts for each landform</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td><strong>Stemscopes 5.7B - EXPLAIN</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>30 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Science Rock- Earth’s Changes*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Day 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Content Connection Video- Changes to Earth*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborate</td>
<td><strong>Stemscopes 5.6D - ELABORATE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>45 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Virtual Investigation- Earth’s changes</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elaborator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Weathering, Erosion, and Deposition Sorting Cards (focus on weathering)- Independent, partner, and led in small group</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*Weathering response sheet (cause and effect Wind, Water, and Ice) (teacher provided template)  
*BrainPop Jr- Slow Land Changes Video and Hard Quiz | Day 5 45 mins |

**Teacher To Do:**  
- **Copy Materials Needed for each F2F Student:** Student Handout and Reference sheet for What’s My Story, Sorting Cards (see link above for pdf)  
- **Virtual Student Materials:**  
- **Online Assigned Materials Needed:**  
- **Journal- Weathering by WWI (Water, Wind, and Ice)**
Weathering

- the breaking down of rock by wind, water, and ice (WWI)

Primary T-TESS Standard 1.4