How Prepared Are Educators To Work With Students Of Color

Ja'Re Thorn

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HOW PREPARED ARE EDUCATORS TO WORK WITH STUDENTS OF COLOR

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Teaching and Learning- Curriculum, Advocacy, & Policy

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education

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HOW PREPARED ARE EDUCATORS TO WORK WITH STUDENTS OF COLOR?

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Abstract

From what I have experienced, there has been a lack of preparation when it comes to preparing educators to work with students of color. This research aimed to explore the importance of early childhood teachers’ cultural preparation programs when it comes to working effectively with students of color. Most of the time, teachers teach to the common core standards set in place by the state. They also implement a curriculum that is considered “best practices” for students instead of paying attention to and considering the individual student’s specific culture, family, and community values and ways of life before planning (Spies, 2011). I conducted several interviews to complete a narrative qualitative study for each participant to tell their stories. From the data collected via the interviews, it was concluded that the participants did not feel they had the required tools needed to work with students of color once they became classroom teachers.
Acknowledgments

First, I want to honor God, the Head of my life. Because of Him, I had this opportunity to complete this program! Next, I would like to especially thank my parents, Dollester Thorn-Hawkins (mom) and Darius Thorn (dad), who supported me through this process. They pushed me when I wanted to give up, kept me focused on the goal, and constantly reminded me who I was and where God was trying to take me. I also want to thank my siblings, JeSaun Sanders (brother) and Jasmine Thorn (sister), who let me worry them and talk their ears off. They, too, have been a great support system and encouragers through the process. My brother especially has pushed me from the time I graduated high school to go far, and it looks like I listened ☺️ Last but not least, I want to thank my committee, Dr. Efrat Sara Efron, Dr. Terry Smith, and Dr. Todd Price. You three have been with me from the beginning and have been the best support system throughout this process. I know that I would not have been able to make it this far without your guidance and encouragement in classes and while writing this dissertation. Thank you all for being there!
This research is dedicated to ensuring that all students of color have educators that can support them academically, emotionally, and socially in the classroom.
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Chapter I

Introduction

One day, I went to a Head Start program to observe several preschool classrooms. During these observations, I looked at how teachers interacted with the children in their classrooms to see if these interactions impacted the learning and development that should be taking place. While observing in one of the classrooms, I noticed that the teacher was not aware or responsive to students who needed additional support when it came to their emotional and academic needs. For example, while playing in the block area, a four-year-old African American boy screamed and cried because his peer took his toy while he was playing with it. The teacher walked over to the area and asked what was going on. The boy explained that his peer had taken his toy. The teacher smirked and said, “But why are you crying? Boys don’t cry. There are other toys for you to choose from,” without addressing the fact that he had the toy first. The boy looked at her and continued to cry but eventually dried his tears and found somewhere else to play. Later that day, another boy needed support writing his name. The teacher said to the student, “You’ve been working on writing your name for the past few months, and you still don’t have it yet? It’s not that hard. Just follow what I gave you already,” in an irritated voice. Seeing teachers talk to and interact with students like this showed me that some teachers do not understand some students’ emotional or academic needs. They are not sensitive enough to realize that these students’ feelings need to be validated and that their educational needs must be supported. Experiences like these have made me interested in researching early childhood education teacher preparation programs and how they prepare educators to work with students of color.
Problem Statement

At the center of this research, I explored the importance of early childhood teachers’ cultural preparation programs when it comes to working effectively with students of color. Most of the time, teachers teach to the common core standards set in place by the state. They also implement a curriculum that is considered “best practices” for students instead of paying attention to and considering the individual student’s specific culture, family, and community values and ways of life before planning (Spies, 2011). Gay argues that the education system “ignores the reality and relevance of the diversity of humanity and education” (As cited by Spies 2011, p. 121). This ignorance implies that the education system often does not attend to the needs of the diverse populations it serves.

In addition, many teachers are so centered on a model classroom that they don’t focus on how students respond or whether they are getting what they need from the lesson. Essentially, the “best practices” that educators are taught to use in their classrooms while completing their early childhood teacher preparation programs are not the practices needed for students of color due to the lack of their academic needs not being met while in school (Spies, 2011). There is a good amount of research indicating that educationally, many young students of color’s needs are not being met. Still, we often continue with the same educational approach in most preparation programs or education schools by not changing how we prepare future teachers. I feel that when we see things that are not working for everyone, we have to find ways to make changes to the system so that everyone can benefit from it.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore ways in which early childhood educators are prepared to work with students of color, not just students who are from
communities that can afford resources to support and enhance their learning. I want to ensure that all early childhood education students receive the same educational support and services regardless of race, gender, and social class. Toward achieving this goal, I explored how we prepare educators to work with students of color in their teacher preparation programs.

Therefore, this study explored the cultural responsiveness perspective on how early childhood teachers should be prepared to teach and support young students of color from birth to five. Early childhood education has been my passion since I was in college, and my goal has always been to find ways to support students where they are. Conducting this research will help educators like me spread the word about why early childhood educators who work with young students of color need to understand themselves and have a strong understanding of their students’ culture to be responsive and effective in their teaching (Redding, 2019).

**Conceptual Framework**

According to Ravitch and Carl (2020), a conceptual framework is defined as "a means of explaining why your topic is important practically and theoretically as well as detailing how your methods will answer your research questions" (p. 35). It also helps the researcher figure out how to bring their research idea to life by understanding its significance and contribution to the field by addressing, "Why is this research necessary? Will it be important to others or make an impact? Is it needed?" In addition to the above, the conceptual framework helps the researcher "cultivate research questions" and find the answer to the research questions by choosing the proper methodology to study the questions (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 35). Essentially, I believe the conceptual framework helps the researcher look at the research holistically instead of coming up with questions and choosing the methodology that they think works for them.
Research Questions

Research questions allow the researcher to come up with a way to become engaged in how they see the experiences in order to understand the problem. These questions help the researcher conceptualize the framework they will use for their research. "Since lived experience is complex and multifaceted, the research questions are often broken down into specific core constructs to be studied." These constructs include "the central concepts or ideas that you are exploring in your research" (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 72). The authors also suggest that these core constructs are the foundation of the researcher's research questions and the overall study.

Before coming up with questions, the researcher needs to take notes on what they want to learn throughout this process. This way, their questions can be targeted and tailored to what they want to know. Taking the time to draft out questions from the notes allows the researcher to create a question(s) to work with while also helping them come up with the core constructs they will use. These constructs will help the researcher develop questions that will hopefully help them understand the problem and, one day, lead toward(s) a solution.

Below are the research questions I sought to answer through my study:

1.) What can we learn from early childhood educators about how they were prepared to work with students of color?

2.) How does a program coordinator design and implement a curriculum that helps educators support the needs of students of color?

3.) Are educators taught self-awareness that will help them be aware of their students and their cultures?

I answered these questions through a qualitative research study. Within this qualitative approach, I interviewed multiple participants about their teacher preparation programs and how
prepared they felt to work with students of color. I also completed a document review of a teacher preparation program to see if their coursework reflects cultural awareness and culturally responsive teaching.

**Significance of Study to The Field**

A child’s development is the most important aspect of life during the first five years due to vital growth taking place in all the domains (Grantham-McGregor, S., Cheung, Y. B., Cueto, S., Glewwe, P., Richter, L., Strupp, B., and International Child Development Steering Group, 2007). Therefore, how we work with children during these years has an even more significant impact on how they will eventually see themselves in school and life. According to education trust.com, there is about a 33% enrollment rate for students of color in preschool programs in Illinois, which is not a lot. I think this is mainly because families don’t feel comfortable putting their children in schools due to the bad reputation that education sometimes holds, especially with students of color. One thing that could help bring calmness to families is the teacher trying to understand each child's uniqueness and what they bring to the classroom (Strickland-Dixon, 2011). How can educators help students of color find their uniqueness in education?

The writings of Strickland-Dixon (2011) help us understand why equity in education for all students, including African Americans, is essential for their success in academia, which is significant for early childhood education. Strickland-Dixon writes, “the current curriculum does not address the cultural needs of the new generation of culturally rich African American students” (p. 114). Strickland-Dixon tells us that culture plays a significant role in how students learn and should be included within the curriculum; therefore, changing the curriculum to support it is most needed. Having a curriculum that emphasizes the importance of culture shows
that children can learn and have different experiences that bring their world into the classroom for all to see. Strickland-Dixon asserts:

Because of the absence of culture in the current curriculum, African American students experience cultural disconnects in school; as a result, they become disengaged from the curriculum, which results in low student achievement, increased dropout rates, and greater risks of incarceration. (Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 114)

Essentially, the author says that when we don’t include a curriculum that supports cultural connections for students of color, we lose them educationally. We must remember to be responsive to students of color by providing a culturally relevant curriculum for them and their lives.

As an educator of educators, we have to give teachers the experience, resources, and materials they need to work with students of color and to do it effectively. Strickland-Dixon (2011, p. 113) writes:

It is unfortunate that teachers fail to possess the experience, resources, and materials needed to effectively educate students of color in urban settings (Jordan and Cooper, 2003). As a result of inequities, many existing constraints affect the academic success of African American students in urban settings.

Teachers can’t make the changes they need in the classrooms if they don’t have the necessary resources to support students of color. In addition to the resources, I believe that working effectively with students of color has to be taught in teacher preparation programs during the first year and continued throughout the program’s curriculum (Djonko-Moore and Traum, 2015). It seems we talk about culture in our programs, but only to a certain extent. Starting culturally responsive conversations early on will help teachers process and gain an in-
depth understanding as they go through their program, which will promote a healthier, more culturally sensitive classroom environment.

As educators, we must prioritize knowing how to become culturally responsive because of what it can do for us individually and collectively in early childhood education, which will produce better teachers and students in the long run. According to Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015), “teachers must be competent in the ability to see cultural diversity as an asset and use cultural knowledge to develop the curriculum” (p. 157). Providing educators with the tools and awareness needed in their preparation programs to become culturally aware of children and their families could change and shift how we teach during early childhood. Hopefully, doing this will create more children who 1.) are aware and in touch with themselves; 2.) will feel understood in the classroom; 3.) feel supported as they continue with their education; 4.) will become students who know they are capable of doing anything. Therefore, if educators could learn to support students of color culturally, there could be so much change and a difference in how our children see themselves academically and personally.

There are several reasons why being culturally aware of students is significant for the field. According to Hawk, Minella, and Sherretz (2017), the benefits of cultural awareness include:

Understanding cultural competence can bridge the cultural differences among teachers, administrators, and school communities. Cultural competence recognizes that multicultural education and education equity and excellence are deeply intertwined for students, diverse students may benefit from different teaching strategies, educators can tailor their teaching styles and classroom practices to the specific needs of students with diverse cultural identities, and in turn, help promote their academic success. Educators
who acknowledge and understand cultural differences are better suited to promote parent
and family engagement. Finally, cultural competence can help foster a school
environment that challenges discrimination and tolerance and reinforces the values
important in a democratic society. (p. 2)

It is essential to help educators understand the significance of working with students of color,
and how we prepare them is really important in how they come to know each student. Suppose
we prepare them for different student populations, cultural norms, and values. In that case, they
will hopefully feel more comfortable teaching students of color and staying in their roles longer.

**Relationship Building**

As I thought about students of color, another significance for the field came to mind: the
importance of building relationships to help them succeed (Hansen, 2018). Relationship building
with students is essential in understanding the realness of who students are and their culture
(Hansen, 2018). From experience, many of the children we come in contact with within these
classrooms come from backgrounds that include challenging families and relationships. They
often live in low-income areas, which is another topic on its own. Hansen’s study showed that
after working with three different students for the study, teacher-student relationships were the
most critical factor when it came to “fostering resilience and achievement” in students (p. 32).
Therefore, relationship-building with students is essential to the overall success of their
education.

**Challenges for Educators**

Anyone who has tried it knows that teaching is one of the most challenging jobs we can
ever do (Aleccia, 2017); however, teachers are essential for our democratic society’s future.
From what I have seen working in the field for the past ten years, teachers leave due to several
different factors and challenges they face while teaching. These challenges include student behavior, low pay, large class sizes, etc. (Aleccia, 2017). At times, it can become frustrating for educators to think beyond the students’ surface level due to all of the other challenges they are experiencing daily. Without educators having the proper experience and training to help them understand the different types of students they may encounter and how to be sensitive to them, early education can become a disaster for the child.

Lack of Respect and Understanding

Another factor that comes into play when working with students of color is the educators’ lack of respect and understanding toward their students and their families. Educators can’t respect students’ cultures if they don’t understand who the student is. Noddings (2015) “argues that education is most effective when it is interwoven with respect through an ethic of care characterized by modeling and practicing caregiving behaviors, engaging in equal dialogue to reach shared understandings, and confirming ways that we value others” (as cited by Jane Murray, 2020, p. 1). This quote by Noddings encourages us to seek a shared understanding of others to value who they are. Educators engaging in this type of understanding will hopefully push education to start looking different in how they approach their students and the curriculum. A part of respect for students is making sure that you are sensitive to their cultural environment and preparing them to be the best individuals they can be for our society. It’s also important to note that respecting students is another way to increase students’ success in the classroom (Bassey, 2016).

Lastly, the other consequence when there is a lack of respect for children and their culture is teachers not adjusting the curriculum they currently use to meet the needs of all students. I’ve learned that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all curriculum when you have several
students with different backgrounds, cultures, and lifestyles and that teachers should be willing to change it to support their students (Bassey, 2016). No student is the same; therefore, we can’t treat them the same. NAEYC’s (2019) position statement talks about the importance of recognizing and understanding a student’s cultural impact on their learning.

It is essential to understand that child development and learning occur within a social-cultural, political, and historical context. Within that context, each person’s experiences may vary based on their social identities and the intersection of these identities. Social identities bring with them socially constructed meanings that reflect biases targeted to marginalized groups, resulting in differential experiences of privilege and injustice. (NAEYC Position Statement, 2019, p. 14)

It hurts their learning when we don’t understand the different identities and social-cultural structures that students of color bring into the classroom. When we miss the mark of not recognizing the differences that our students and their families offer, we continue to have a society that works with systematic biases against students of color. It keeps the door closed to raising and educating students that would promote a healthy society full of diversity and inclusion, leaving students to not care about people other than themselves. Jalango, Stevenson, Davis, and Stanek (2010) write:

Instead of (childhood) being viewed as a stage of life worthy of respect in its own right, with its own unique features, it is now too often viewed as disconnected from important human endeavours, or at best as preparation for the future... (p. 1)

Here, the authors express how respect for children is not what it should be. When respect is not there, neither is a growing and changing society.
Whether we see it or not, this is a big deal regarding educating teachers. Just think about the times we are currently in. With all the movements and news stories we hear daily, how important and appropriate would it be to add this to the curriculum in teacher preparation programs from day one and every year after that until they graduate? Giving teachers opportunities to practice and learn more about culturally responsive teaching while in their programs, I believe, could be a game-changer for our teachers and students. This is just preparing teachers to be better for the students, which they deserve.

Where It All Began -- Personal Reflections

From as early as I knew, I wanted to work with children. I remember being a little girl lining all my baby dolls up on the couch, teaching them using the chalkboard and books I had, and playing doctor with them, like most young kids. These experiences stuck with me for many years to follow. As I got older, I often said that I would be a doctor several times, and all I remember is my parents encouraging me that I could be whatever I wanted to be. So, I often thought about that as I completed school.

My journey in early childhood education began when I was about 12 years old, in the seventh grade, when my first niece was born. The most exciting thing in my life had just made her entrance. Her birth was literally the happiest time for me at that point because all I knew was that I was going to be an auntie for the first time. Imagine being the only one of your friends in the seventh grade being able to say, “My niece.” The joy I felt was indescribable. There was so much excitement, almost as if it was my child. Although I was young, I was thrilled that I was about to have a real-life baby to play with instead of baby dolls. My niece was a beautiful, dark-skinned skinny baby that had the brightest smile, and not to mention she looked just like my brother. The happiest baby I had ever seen was right in front of me.
As she grew, her development was that of a typically developing child. She began walking, talking, and hitting milestones like any other child her age. However, when she was around three years old, things changed. Out of the blue, she just stopped talking, and nobody understood why. Her parents took her to several doctor’s visits to figure out what was going on with her, but no one had answers. It wasn’t until a few years later that they discovered she had Autism. Finding this out was some of her parents’ most heartbreaking news. I remember there was a bunch of crying and praying from everyone trying to understand why this had to happen to us. There was a lot of guilt, shame, and questions that continued to be had. The shock was too overwhelming and too much for us to deal with at the time. Not to mention the many unanswered questions that were still going through everyone’s heads. What could cause something like this to happen? No one knew, and they still don’t know to this day.

At that time, autism research was not as extensive as it is now, so doctors had no idea what was going on with her until later on down the line. At this point, my interest really began to spark. How could a child who was developing typically all of a sudden change that fast and stop talking? The curiosity began to run rampant in my mind at this very early age.

My College Journey

Once I got into college, I knew I wanted to work with children and be a pediatrician. However, I knew that path was not for me once I took biology. Therefore, I had to find another way to make working with children possible. The following semester, I asked my counselor what other jobs I could do where I would still work with children. She mentioned a Child Life Specialist who works with children in a hospital setting that provides them with comfort and support as they prepare for surgery and lengthy hospital stays. To achieve this, I had to complete my degree in Child Development. That was when I discovered my genuine interest in children.
I started taking classes on how children developed and what they needed to thrive very early on. I remember taking one course where I completed an ASQ-3 (Ages and Stages Questionnaire), which gives you a snapshot of a child’s development in all five domains based on what they can and cannot do. This screening also determines whether children need additional services to support their development and growth. During this course, I knew that assessing children’s development would be my thing. I often wondered whether using an assessment tool when my niece was younger would have allowed her autism to be diagnosed earlier than it was. This realization caused me to change my career path and want to become a developmental therapist who provides intervention support for children from birth to three years old. They go into the child’s natural environment and work with them on the areas where they need additional help based on the results of the ASQ-3 screening that was performed. As I completed the training and hours required to begin this work, I realized I did not feel comfortable going into people’s homes, although I liked assessing young children. The assessment piece was the most interesting because that was the part I needed to understand when it came to development.

Once I completed my bachelor’s degree, I decided to continue my studies and get my master’s in child development, specializing in infancy (0-3). It was here that I saw the importance of making sure that children receive these developmental screenings during the first three years of life so that we can catch the issues and developmental delays that they may have or may be experiencing. These screenings are not meant to label children but to ensure they have an equal opportunity for the same learning and development as the next child. It doesn’t guarantee that a child won’t have developmental delays, but it catches the problem early so that children can get the supports they need as soon as possible. This was a good reminder of why they say the first five years are the most important to the development of children (Allen and Kelly, 2015). If
an assessment had been performed early for my niece, would we have been able to catch it and get her the support and services she needed? I will never know, but this experience put me in the mind frame of not wanting another family to experience the things my family did. Often, it’s not easy for parents to accept that their children have developmental delays because they don’t want their children to be labeled. Still, having them assessed and supported is better than waiting until they are older, which will only make things worse for them emotionally, socially, and academically. Parents have to think beyond themselves in these moments and think about what would be best for the child.

After graduating and starting my first job in early childhood education as a support teacher, I now recognize that my view of children and families was distorted. I would only want to work in certain areas because of my judgmental mindset. If a child smelled funny, came to school looking dirty, or their parents did not have proper grammar, I would turn my nose up and say, “This is not for me.” However, as I continued working with the families and children, I realized what I was dealing with was beyond what I saw. I realized that these children and families had a need. But I was too busy turning my nose up or frowning my face at them that I could not see what they really needed and why they were there in the first place. It wasn’t until I started therapy that I asked myself some necessary questions. Did Ja’Re really know who she was since she was so judgmental of others? Did Ja’Re understand that some people could not control their circumstances and situations? Did Ja’Re not understand how much these children and families need her? All of these answers were a big NO and a big reason why I wanted to do this research. Even though I was of the same race as most of my students, I did not know how to connect with them or even think beyond what I was taught in school. And not to mention the Asian population that was in the center as well. I had no idea how to connect with any of them.
I can appreciate my program because it taught me about child development and how to understand the differences and uniqueness that each child brings. When working with any child, this means getting to know them, their family, background, culture, community, and what they need (Bassey, 2016). The program reminded me that children don’t come alone but that they come with their life experiences within their familial and social surroundings. There is no way that we can take care of the child and not support the family dynamic as well. Overall, my program encouraged me to become, as an educator, reflective of my past, my upbringing, and my current self. It made me think about my years in school as a child, the environments I was in, the people around me, and how all of that affected me, even now.

The Awakening

People don’t often realize how much our experiences as children, teenagers, and young adults affect us, whether good or bad (Novais, Henriques, Vidal-Alves, and Magalhães, 2021), and it took my master’s program to bring that to my attention. This recognition brought up the idea of self-awareness. Maxine Greene (1978) talks about this idea of wide-awakeness in which people come into this awareness that things are not the way they should be and that things could be better or different. Williams (2017) follows up on Greene’s work of wide-awakeness. Below is how Williams defines it:

Wide-awakeness is defined as a heightened sense of consciousness, encouraging critical awareness and deep engagement with one’s world. As individuals come alive in this way, their open-minded exploration is fueled by their development of personal agency and self-worth through their pursuit of presentness and possibility. (p. 1)

This idea helps us become conscious of the world around us and allows us to begin thinking outside the box and have an open dialogue. In Greene’s (1995) work, she explains, “the qualities
of mind wide-awareness develops as “excellences,” and she lists these as “tentativeness; regard for evidence; simultaneously critical and creative thinking; openness to dialogue; and a sense of agency, social commitment, and concern” (as cited by Williams, 2017, p. 3). The work by Maxine Greene made me think about self-awareness and how this concept of wide-awareness is really about being able to search and find deep meaning. Reading Green’s work made me question how aware I had been of myself before I got into my master’s program. I had not even thought about it because it was something that I had not yet been taught. This experience brought the realization that if it took me well into my twenties to discover bits of who I am through a program, how many others out there have not had the opportunity to find out who they are and their inner selves as well?

I think back to when I began teaching at the college level; I often asked my students what made them want to go into the teaching profession to understand why they chose this line of work. Most of the time, the teacher candidates shared they loved kids and wanted to work with them. From this response, I would dig deeper into their "why." This is where I wanted these novice educators’ self-awareness to begin. I wanted them to start reflecting deeply on why they decided to work with children. After this, self-awareness became a staple in my classes as I talked to students about their ‘whys.’

When I graduated with my master’s, my first job was as a director of a daycare center in Chicago. Most of the areas where I worked were in low-income communities, which meant that so was the daycare center. South Chicago was an area where African Americans and Mexicans mainly populated. Here is where I first found that educators were not aware of the needs of young students of color. It was how the children were talked to, handled, and learned. It was difficult for me as I often realized that no one in this center was trained appropriately to work
with students of color. Yes, they may have gone to school and finished their bachelor’s and master’s degrees; some even had licenses. Still, you could tell they did not understand what this population of children needed culturally, socially, emotionally, and academically.

The African American students seemed to have had it the worst. Teachers often pre-judged children and made assumptions without even knowing their backgrounds, and even if they did know, that still didn’t matter. I think back to the children who had disabilities or emotional issues and how some of the staff would exclude them or treat them differently because they had this idea of who the children were without trying to know them aside from their disability and emotional issues. They often considered these children bad and did not want to deal with them. Teachers did not have the patience, understanding, or empathy these students needed, as noted by Djonko-Moore and Traum, 2015. Even teachers that looked like them still treated them this way. I would often look at these behaviors from both sides and say that things would be different if the teachers only understood what these children were experiencing and what they needed. This is the reason I started teaching. I felt that if I could instill the values of working with students of color differently and encouraging self-awareness in teachers early on, this could potentially affect how students were handled in the classroom and how they learned. I felt this piece of sensitivity that our students needed was often missing, and I wanted to bring that awareness to teachers.

**Educating Staff**

During my career, I have tried to change how teachers viewed students by helping them see the other side of things and how they needed support and love. However, it didn’t matter for most because they were stuck in their old ways of doing things and felt how they were taught got the job done. These behaviors from teachers did nothing but traumatize children even more. No
matter how I tried to show educators differently, they could not see it. I tried to figure out a way to help educators be culturally responsive early to lessen the issues that could potentially arise (e.g., educators building classrooms that focus on the model classroom, educators being insensitive, unaware, and unresponsive, students being unteachable, etc.) (Spies, 2011) (Djonko-Moore and Traum, 2015) (Nganga, 2015). I say educators because it wasn’t just teachers who exhibited these behaviors but the administration as well.

Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) talk about how teachers often teach this “model classroom” that they are taught in their preparation programs which usually leaves out the consideration for African American students. The authors mention that teachers are often so worried about preparing students to be good students and pass the tests that they are unaware of these students’ “real” academic needs (Djonko-Moore and Traum, 2015). Often, students begin to develop low self-esteem and confidence in school because they never had teachers who worked with them to ensure they understood the material instead of just teaching to meet the curriculum (Prince and Howard, 2002). As they start getting older, this is one of the reasons why the dropout rate becomes high as they try to continue through school (Vavrus, 2008). In connection to what I’ve seen, there’s an even greater need for us to help teachers become self-aware and realize that if they are self-aware, they will understand the needs of their students a bit more than they do now (Park, Riley, and Branch, 2020).

One of the things that educators tend to forget when working with students of color is that many of them have complicated lives. So, before they can even think about learning, they need to address the social-emotional piece of their daily lives. Not to mention everything that has happened with the Black Lives Matter movement for the past two years. Henward, Lyu, and Jackson (2021) discuss how African American preschool teachers approached police play in the
era of the Black Lives Movement. The way children talked and played changed for some during this time, making teachers who were not African American interpret their play differently and misunderstand the children’s play (Henward et al., 2021). Our children are seeing and dealing with things they cannot handle at such a young age, and they need educators who can support them. Henward et al. state that the early childhood field will continue to grow with White, middle-class teachers teaching students of color. “Unintentionally, these teachers may fail to recognize the play and talk to contain challenges born out of racism and inequality” (Henward et al., 2021, p. 1). Having White educators does not mean that we can’t have some good educators. However, we can probably count the percentage of them who actually take the time to learn in-depth about young students of color to ensure that they are not misinterpreting our children and their experiences.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework determines what the researcher will use to help support their research questions and goals. Ravitch and Carl (2020) discuss three primary keys that help the researcher understand the role of theory in research. "First, theory is central to developing qualitative studies in formative (ongoing) and summative (final) ways. Second, theory helps to situate a study within ongoing conversations and existing theories and findings in relevant fields. Third, theory helps to add multiple levels of understanding about a phenomenon and the context in which it occurs" (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 76). Essentially, the theoretical framework helps guide the study based on the literature already out there as the researcher searches, reads, and writes their review. According to Ravitch and Carl (2020), "a literature review is a process that helps you cultivate the theoretical framework…” (p. 78). This is a continual process that will
happen as long as they are researching; therefore, their theoretical framework will continually be refined as they go through the process.

For this study, Culturally Responsive Teaching (C.R.T.) was used as the theoretical basis since I was looking at whether teacher preparation programs prepare educators to work with students of color. I wanted to know how educators had been trained to be culturally aware of their students. Culturally responsive teaching does not just look at how educators teach students of color but how aware they are of the student's emotional, academic, and cultural needs. Acquah and Szelei (2018) state that culturally responsive teaching is "defined as an approach to teaching that uses the cultural heritages, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students as conduits to facilitate the teaching-learning process (p. 158). Culturally responsive teaching also "challenges deficit models of teaching, validates students' cultural and linguistic background and perceives students as active producers of knowledge" (p. 158). Essentially, culturally responsive teaching begins to help educators dig deep down to really think beyond the surface levels of our students, but rather, the ability to look at them holistically in a way that supports every area of their learning. This theory also helps educators become more intentional with their teaching instead of just teaching by the book. It also allows administrators to look deeper into the curriculum and standards they approve because this can either enhance or hinder our students as they learn.

Theoretical Perspective

Thinking about my work and what influences me to focus on equity and equality in education for all children, especially those that are African American, my philosophy comes from a Learner-Centered approach. To me, it is important that children guide their own education, with teachers following their lead through the process.
According to Schiro (2013), “A critical component of Learner-Centered educators’ endeavors is their firsthand observations of people. Viewing people’s growth developmentally goes beyond just making sure that the instructional activities match people’s intellectual, social, and psychological attributes” (p. 117). Schiro attempts to help us understand that you have to observe the people that you are trying to teach in this approach. The development of these students goes beyond their intellectual, social, and psychological abilities. This means that there is more to a person than those attributes listed. Schiro reminds us that we must see beyond students’ physical abilities and help support them developmentally. On the other side, this approach shows that teachers can be aware of students’ needs because this teaching style does not directly reflect a traditional teaching classroom experience. For example, Schiro expresses that as a part of Learner-Centered classrooms,

Teachers are always observing students to determine their needs and interests and then, based on what they observed, designing activities that capitalize on those needs and interests including those activities among the choices available to students in the classroom—if they think the activities will further students’ growth and self-actualization within the contexts of their goals for the students. (p. 122)

This shows that teachers have the ability to create an environment in the classroom that could meet the student’s needs culturally. However, it takes for a teacher to be open to learning about their students and their needs, as well as taking what they have learned in their teaching preparation programs and applying that into the classroom.

Ultimately, the Learner-Centered approach puts learners at the center of their educational experiences. This means that teachers must learn to understand what students of color need in
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order for them to have the best educational experiences possible. Schiro (2013) discusses that the Learner-Centered ideology focuses

On the needs and concerns of individuals (p. 5) and that “in the learner-centered school, the needs and interests of learners, rather than those of teachers, principals, school subjects, parents, or politician, play a major role in determining the school programs. (p. 105)

Schiro points out the importance of focusing on the needs of children in the classroom in a way that would promote a diverse curriculum. Schiro also says, “the interests, needs, and desires of learners influence the nature of the school program, the content of the curriculum, and (to some degree) the governance of the classroom” (p. 105). If it wasn’t important for educators to focus on the needs of students, why would this be an educational approach? Why does this ideology focus our attention on what students need? There has to be something to it. Exploring how teachers are prepared to work with students of color is at the center of this research. Schiro’s Learner-Centered ideology indicates that in order for students to thrive in their environment, teachers must focus on the needs of the students.

Self-Awareness

Baum and King (2006) remind us that “working with young children is a very demanding, challenging and rewarding job” (p. 217). We already know that most educators get into this field because they enjoy working with children and helping them grow and develop. But the authors posed a great question when we think about what we could do differently to ensure that educators are prepared to work with students of color. Baum and King (2006) write:

How can we prepare preservice teachers to make decisions that focus on the changing and diverse needs of children, rather than simply creating short-term solutions that make
their own daily work more manageable and enjoyable? How can we encourage preservice teachers to become less egocentric and consider first and foremost the needs of the children in their care? (p. 217)

As I read this quote, it appears that Baum and King want teachers to demonstrate some sort of self-awareness of others. They want teachers to move away from the egocentric perspective of thinking of only themselves and focus on the student’s needs in their classrooms. In education, I believe this is what we want to get at, not just when working with students of color but any student. How can we help educators make decisions that meet their students’ needs? We don’t just want them to make decisions but to make decisions that are considered best practices culturally. But still, how can we help them get to the point where they know how to make those good decisions for themselves and their students? Baum and King suggest:

The foundation of good decision-making lies in helping preservice teachers develop a sense of self-awareness. This sense involves, in part, helping preservice teachers develop an ability to examine and identify the personal characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes that make them who they are and influence the way they think about teaching and learning, thus influencing their decision-making process. (p. 217)

This type of process that the authors mention can be an experience that is very uncomfortable for anyone to go through. But if we don’t encounter those uncomfortable moments, will we ever really change? Change often comes when we have those moments that are not the easiest to confront. When we take the time to examine our own beliefs, we then help students find the freedom they need to express their beliefs and opinions (Baum and King, 2006).

So, what is self-awareness? Park, Riley, and Branch (2020) define it as “accurately assessing one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of
self-confidence” (p. 185). Self-awareness starts with first understanding who you are, not just knowing who you are. According to Baum and King (2006), “As preservice teachers acquire an understanding of themselves, they are ready to begin to look at the instructional techniques they use by exploring their own learning and teaching experiences” (p. 221). This type of self-awareness causes educators to go down memory lane, reflecting on past experiences and issues that did not sit well with them and figuring out a way not to reproduce what happened to them (Baum and King, 2006). Educators might ask themselves questions like, what attitudes and values have been instilled in me from a child that causes me to look at others differently and judge them? What are my motives for doing what I do, and why? Out of where were my desires formed? What would people say about my character and who I am as a person? Am I in tune with my feelings? These are some of the questions that can help one become aware of who they are. Baum and King remind us that having these types of questions and experiences are not so bad because it allows educators to think about their teaching practices and make sure that they create developmentally appropriate experiences for their students. Self-awareness is not an easy process, but it is and will be well worth it in the end, especially when it comes to educating students of color.

Creating Self-Awareness in Schools

So, what can we do to help create an atmosphere of self-awareness in our classrooms? Baum and King (2006) write, “In order to ensure that the educational opportunities we offer our students are meaningful and relevant to their lives, it is important for teacher educators to make a sincere effort to get to know their students as individuals” (p. 220). Getting to know every student in your classroom as individuals can make a world of difference when it comes to education. Can you imagine how good the curriculum could be and how much our students could
learn if they had people who took the time to get to know them as individuals? Students of color would feel included, and teachers would feel like they are making a difference. In addition to getting to know your students, the authors also suggest that educators should model self-awareness in the classroom:

This means that we should not only examine how we present information to our students, but also the ways they share with us. Rather than presenting information in absolutes, we should express awareness that our own behaviors are a reflection of the beliefs and values that we have developed over time. (p. 221)

Therefore, educators changing how they interact with students can be another big step in education.

Williams (2017) quotes an amazing piece from Maxine Greene’s (1995) idea of wide-awakening. She wrote:

Teachers intent on awakening, must be wide-awake themselves. They must seek “truly to attend” to students. Teachers should be present with students in the moment and invest in them as individuals, with the hope of inspiring belief in their worth and possibility. This care is a teacher’s ability to join students in the journey of wide-awakening. From these critical interactions, students may develop a situated awareness of their world, and assert their understanding of it. (p. 4)

During this process of awakening, teachers, and students learn how to be aware and thoughtful when it comes to others. This could change the way students see themselves, allowing them to see others differently. It also emphasizes to the students that they are seen and heard by more than just their families. Most children look for validation from others to feel some sort of self-worth (Rudolph, Caldwell, and Conley, 2005). Lastly, it also lets this population of students
know they are valued and that someone wants to help them and see them excel in their education to become their best selves.

**Benefits and Consequences of Self-Awareness**

Baum and King (2006) give a few examples of how students could benefit from teachers being self-aware.

1.) It provides students with frequent and varied opportunities to learn about themselves, and

2.) Students are able to develop a realistic view of themselves.

Students being aware of themselves is one of the most important things that we can do for our society. The more they are aware of who they are, they will hopefully gain the same type of awareness and respect for others. I think this is part of the reason why we have so many students who do not care about the next person because they have not been taught how to consider themselves first. Therefore, teachers demonstrating this behavior to students and working on it with them could start a revolving cycle of self-awareness in our schools and communities.

In addition to the benefits of self-awareness in early childhood education, below are some consequences of a lack of self-awareness.

1.) We have a high teacher turnover rate (Christ and Wang, 2012).

2.) Students will not have accurate self-awareness (Beaman, Klentz, Diener, and Svanum, 1979).

Having high teacher turnover in education is a consequence of them not knowing who they are. The work becomes hard because they have not tapped into who they are, which makes it harder for them to tap into who their students are and what they need. In my opinion, this is an area of frustration for teachers, which is why they leave. Not having the proper training to fully know
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themselves or understand their students’ cultures can make it hard to adjust to the classroom and be their best selves.

When we aren’t proactive in helping educators be successful in working with students of color, it’s almost as if we fail our students before they begin. These students are now in the hands of people who are not self-aware and do not understand the importance of their culture and individual identities. This could produce a lot of insecure and insensitive students who do not understand the importance of people outside of themselves. I believe this is how we potentially end up with many hateful people walking around because they never learned how to acknowledge or be aware of the differences that everyone else has to offer.

**Self-Awareness and Cultural Awareness in Teacher Preparation Programs**

What do self-awareness and cultural awareness look like in teacher preparation programs? Baum and King (2006) write, “The foundation for a teacher preparation program that promotes the development of self-awareness lies in creating an environment in which students have a sense of safety and support in their efforts of self-discovery” (p. 218). If this technique is taught in teacher preparation programs, it would be easier for teachers to implement it in their classrooms when they begin teaching. But as of now, Doran (2020) writes:

Teacher preparation programs continue to come under scrutiny, as educational reform efforts become established across the country, for the quality and rigor of their programs for preservice teachers (NCTQ, 2013). The quality of programs, and their ability to expose teachers to various perspectives, forms of diversity, and curriculum approaches, plays a significant role in the dispositions and quality of new teachers (Bischoff, French and Shaumloffel, 2014; Kidd et al., 2014). (p. 61)
The author lets us know that teacher preparation programs do not always prepare teachers to work with diverse students, which has become an issue in these programs, and because of this, our students are suffering the most.

According to Gay (2002), “too many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach ethnically diverse students” (p. 106). This thought brought a question to mind: how can teachers be held accountable for something they do wrong in the classroom if they aren’t being taught to work with diverse populations in the first place? Gay (2002) also writes, “We can’t teach what we don’t know” (p. 106). How can we expect teachers to give something they don’t have to give? This brings me to my next point, the importance of using teacher preparation programs to teach self and cultural awareness to work with students of color.

Gay (2002) talks about the importance of cultural understanding and how “the knowledge that teachers need to have about cultural diversity goes beyond mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways” (p. 107). It is noted throughout all of Gay’s many writings that teachers have to be exposed to cultural diversity in order to be successful when working with students of color. Teachers, no matter the population they want to work with, should always be able to experience different cultures. It widens the number of things they can do in the classroom and helps them expose their students to other cultures, whether they are present in the classroom or not.

Cultural Awareness

According to the research that was done by Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015), “the participants reported missed opportunities in their coursework to learn skills that would have helped them to be culturally responsive” (p. 159). Although many teacher preparation
programs give teachers some of the tools they need to work with students, there are still areas of the programs that need to be revisited to ensure that they support teachers in this critical area of work. I found this to be true while supervising some of my master-level students in their field experiences. The teachers in the child care programs that they were in did not understand the importance of how to work, plan, and interact age-appropriately with the children. These experiences have made me wonder where the disconnect is between teachers when they leave their teacher preparation programs and when they enter the classroom to begin teaching. Moreover, I’ve worked in programs where teachers did not understand what many young students of color experienced; therefore, these teachers could not relate to the students’ lives. How do you expect them to learn anything if you can’t relate to the students’ lives outside of school and their cultural backgrounds?

Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) write, “Teachers must be competent in the ability to see cultural diversity as an asset and use cultural knowledge to develop the curriculum” (p. 157). The authors express that teachers must be able to think beyond the physical student they see to plan activities and a curriculum suitable for culturally diverse students. But where does this start? It doesn’t just start when teachers get in the classroom and start teaching. This should begin while teachers are in their preparation programs, learning to be competent.

One thing I noticed while reading that often came into play when working with students of color is having teachers who do not look like the students. Research has shown that sometimes, teachers who do not look like their students don’t get or understand the student. Nganga (2015) studied predominately White, Non-Hispanic teachers who worked in a rural area with African American children in early childhood education. The author discusses how the teachers had “little or no exposure to cultural and global diversity,” which could “lead to biased
behavior” (Nganga, 2015, p. 4, 8). Teachers who display biased behaviors towards students set
the tone that what they need is unimportant. Through this research, the author shows the
importance of teachers’ learning, knowing, and understanding the cultural aspect of students and
the impacts it could have on their learning, especially when they are not from the same race and
culture. However, when teachers and young students of color share the experience of cultural
understanding, something unique happens. Based on the research, we know that students thrive
better when working with people who look like them. Redding (2019) says:

Students have the potential to benefit from assignment to a teacher of their own race to
the extent to which students and teachers share similar beliefs about what it means to
identify with a particular racial or ethnic group, and these beliefs are translated into
higher expectations for student learning, improved teaching, and stronger relationships
with students. (p. 503)

Redding’s (2019) research shows that students relate to teachers who look more like them
and understand their struggles, increasing students’ academic and behavioral outcomes. This
could mean that if teachers do not look like students, it may cause them to do extra work to
understand students from their perspectives and what they experience in their daily lives outside
of the classroom. Teachers who are not African American need to acquire knowledge and
appreciation of the African American culture, norms, and values. Honestly, no matter the race,
all teachers should still try to gain this same knowledge. This should partially come through the
responsibility of teacher preparation programs to provide this knowledge and appreciation.
According to Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015), “the National Council for Accreditation of
Teacher Education (2008) requires teacher education programs to provide experiences that allow
teacher candidates to interact with diverse populations and require teacher candidates to
demonstrate proficiency with diversity” (p.156). Suppose teachers were to experience diversity throughout their educational journey while exploring and becoming aware of their own biases from start to finish. In that case, I believe that we would be able to produce more culturally aware teachers that are responsive to the needs of their students.

Djonko-Moore and Traum tell us that “…teachers must develop the characteristics and skills necessary to instruct culturally diverse students” (p. 158). Additionally, Rychly and Graves (2012) state, “The main characteristics that teachers need to develop include caring and empathy, the ability to reflect on their beliefs about other cultures, the ability to reflect on their own culture, and knowledge about other cultures” (as cited by Djonko-Moore and Traum, 2015, p. 158). The authors tell us that even if teachers don’t look like their students, there are still attributes that all teachers should possess to work effectively with students that do not look like them, which should happen in teacher preparation programs.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) write:

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a strategy that addresses the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a concept that has the potential to improve the attention, engagement, and success of students of color. (p. 156)

CRT is a form of teaching that reaches students and expands the teacher’s understanding of how to educate students of color authentically. “The purpose is to make learning more culturally relevant and effective for this population of students (Vavrus, 2008, p. 50). Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) note that teachers use this “model classroom,” which does not reflect attentiveness to students of color or how they learn. Although a good amount of research
indicates that students of color needs are not being met educationally, we sometimes continue not to change how we prepare teachers.

Ladson-Billings’ work emphasizes that a part of pedagogy is to help these students identify who they are and to “challenge social inequities that exist in their communities” (As cited by Djonko-Moore and Traum, 2015, p. 157). But how can we combat what students of color are experiencing if educators don’t understand what they are doing with this group? Culturally responsive teaching should push and encourage students to explore themselves and the curriculum in a way that will help them better understand their strengths in education and life. CRT should include the teacher creating an environment that is emotionally and intellectually safe, according to Baum and King (2006). One thing that the authors discussed is that teachers should examine their pedagogy. When teachers get to the point that they can think about all their students at one time while planning, then we have truly progressed. Vavrus (2018) writes:

CRT conceptualizes pedagogy as a two-way communicative process designed to decrease student passivity by placing student involvement at the center of teaching and learning. Rather than teachers defining their roles as just the transmitters of information, CRT calls on teachers to help students be active participants in the production and acquisition of knowledge. This requires teachers to acknowledge the conceptual and cultural resources or assets that culturally different students bring to their schools and then to affirm the backgrounds of all students. (p. 50)

I love this quote because, essentially, the author is telling us exactly how education should be when we are focused on the student. Education is not about the teacher but about what the student needs in order to be an active participant in their learning. The key here is ‘active’
participants, but they can’t participate if the teacher hasn’t taken the time to find ways to get them engaged in their learning. If you think about it, students basically make the curriculum for themselves. The teacher’s job should be to take what they see the students doing and implement it in a developmentally appropriate way. This shows that teachers are both aware and responsive to their students and can give them what they need to succeed in the classroom. It is very possible for teachers to incorporate the student’s interests into the curriculum that they have to use. By doing this, the process for teachers and students becomes a parallel learning process in the classroom.

So, what should being culturally aware look like in early childhood education? According to Baum and King (2006), it involves educating the whole child, meaning that we look at the entire child, not just the academic person we see at school daily. It should focus on every area, “his or her individual needs and characteristics, and the cultural and social contexts in which he or she lives” (p. 219). A part of being aware is taking the time to let children know that they are seen and recognized. No child is the same, and that’s important for those children that don’t feel seen at home or with their families.

**Pedagogical Considerations in a World of Best Practices**

Based on the above, how can we help teachers gain best practices when working with students of color? 1.) Teachers must be able to hear and see students for who they are. 2.) Teachers must be able to focus on meeting the students’ needs more so than teaching a curriculum that does not meet their needs.

According to Strickland-Dixon's (2011) article, *Curriculum Construction: Conflicts and Constraints That Promote the Underachievement of African American Students in Urban Schools*, we have to move away from the traditional curriculum model that we tend to use when
working with African American students. This model does not prove to meet the needs of these students academically, socially, and emotionally.

Scholars conveying the tragedies that exist for African American students in the public school setting would argue that the academic failure is the direct result of the public education system. The current structure sustains educational inequities to the extent that many African American students are the recipients of inferior instruction. (Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 113)

Ultimately, if we want to support all students regardless of race, status, etc., we first have to look at the current system we are using to educate them. Not only that but the policies that are used to make decisions about the curriculum used in schools. Strickland-Dixon (2011, p. 113) quotes Marsh and Willis (1999), saying, “Many policy statements about curriculum limit the school’s ability to make decisions about their own individual needs.” Until we get people in these positions that understand that the curriculum needs to cater to all students, including students of color, we will still experience the same issues when it comes to curriculum. I understand they want everyone to be on the same page, but each school or classroom should be able to form its own policies on how the curriculum should be used for the population they serve. We need to make sure that the “printed curriculum materials” we use do not “foster a lack of understanding of the cultural and historical contributions made to the United States by African Americans” (Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 113).

The curriculum must address all students' cultural needs, including students of color. The goal is to ensure that “state standards and mandates are connections to culturally relevant pedagogy aimed at enhancing the academic experiences of students of color” (Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 115). To support and address this issue in education, Illinois has developed culturally
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responsive teaching and learning standards that should make for a better educational experience for teachers and students. These standards include:

a.) Self-awareness and Relationships to Others;

b.) Systems of Oppression;

c.) Students as Individuals;

d.) Students as Co-Creators;

e.) Leveraging Student Advocacy;

f.) Family and Community Collaboration;

g.) Content Selections in All Curricula;

h.) Student Representation in the Learning Environment (www.isbe.net)

These standards created by the state board of education are meant to help students become a part of their learning. These standards bring some hope that people in higher positions realize that education is not all-inclusive, although they feel it is. The implementation of these standards indicates that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in education.

In addition, we have to make sure that all teachers are well prepared to service this population in the classroom. So again, how can we support all students? By looking back at history, seeing what did not work, and finding a better way, by making sure that students of color's voices are being heard and that they are also seen in the classroom as individuals, and lastly, by having teachers who will “inspire, motivate, instill values and knowledge” (Bassey, 2016, p. 1). Although we know this will not be an easy task, it is up to us to ensure that the people in higher positions hear our concerns regarding promoting equity and equality in education.

Summary
This chapter discussed my introduction to this work, my background, and what made me interested in wanting to research this topic. This topic will be explored as I seek to answer whether or not educators are prepared to work with students of color. I discussed the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that are applied to this study, introduced my research questions, and talked about the significance of my study to the field of early childhood education. In addition, I looked at culturally responsive teaching, the standards Illinois created to make classrooms culturally sensitive, the concept of wide-awakeness by Maxine Greene (1978), and pedagogical considerations.

As an African American student, I see the importance of ensuring children have what they need early on. As an adult, I still have moments of wanting to give up due to not comprehending things like others I know. It can be very frustrating because, as my mother says, I have had this problem since I was young. It often has me thinking back to my school days, wondering if I had teachers that were patient enough to work with me individually to ensure that I had everything I needed. As I am writing, I am very thankful to God for the growth that has taken place in my personal and professional life. How can I expect to connect and push students’ learning if I don’t understand what I need or what they need? From these experiences, I have come to know myself as more than someone who loves children and families, but one who wants children and families to be successful in every way possible, including their educational journey.

In this day and time, being an early childhood educator has helped me become more reflective of who I am as an educator. Working with students of color should cause one to be reflective, no matter if they are of the same race or different, especially when working with children from birth to five. We know the first five years of life are essential, setting the tone for the rest. If we are not reflective educators, how can we help others become reflective or even
know who they are? Being self-aware teaches us that there are other people in the world besides ourselves and that the things they need also matter.

As I was writing, I wondered how many others have questioned or are questioning their self-awareness or even being reflective of it. I also wonder how it has or has not impacted their work with children and families. Do they feel they could have been more successful? Could they have done something different now that they know differently? I know I could have! These things make me wonder what needs to be done so that children and families will not suffer from our lack of self-awareness and reflection. It truly saddens me when our children have to pay for our ignorance regarding culture, diversity, and just the overall understanding of people in general. The more I think about this, the harder I want to work to ensure that equality will soon occur for students of color, no matter how old they are. Like me, it may take others time to grow into this idea of cultural responsiveness to someone other than themselves.

What’s Next?

In chapter two, I explored three different themes in the literature review that looks at the history of early childhood education and teacher preparation programs, the ideologies representing early childhood education, and culturally responsive teaching. These are some of the main themes that will support my research when understanding the importance of working with students of color.
Chapter II

Literature Review

At the center of this research, I explored the importance of early childhood teachers’ cultural preparation programs when working effectively with students of color. This chapter reviews relevant published literature to understand the theories and studies conducted on the topic. The review evolves around the following themes, the historical perspectives of early childhood education and teacher preparation programs and how they came about, the ideology that I stand on for this work, and the culturally responsive pedagogy that teachers need to be able to support students of color in their educational journey. Conducting this literature review will help the reader understand why early childhood educators who work with young students of color need to understand themselves and have a strong understanding of their students’ culture to be responsive and effective in their teaching (Redding, 2019).

Most of the time, teachers teach to the common core standards set in place by the state. They also implement a curriculum that is considered “best practices” for students rather than before planning the curriculum, paying attention and consideration to the individual student’s specific culture, family, and community values and ways of life (Spies, 2011). Gay argues that the education system “ignores the reality and relevance of the diversity of humanity and education” (As cited by Spies (2011, p. 121). This ignorance implies that the education system often does not attend to the needs of the diverse populations that it serves.

Resource Selection

Several resources were used to find the literature to support the themes and topics for this research. To gather my resources, I used an online database which helped me locate several different articles and books that I thought were interesting for my topic. Once I found a resource
that would be helpful for my research, I downloaded it to my Zotero library and iCloud or requested it through the online database and organized them by themes and topics. I then read through them and highlighted the most important information in each text that I felt was beneficial and would be useful. I highlighted statements and quotes that stood out the most to me. I read and reread the texts, especially the highlighted parts, to see if what I read made sense to include in my paper. Lastly, I took notes on why it was necessary, what it meant for my research, and how it related to my work. That became the beginning of how I wrote this literature review and found a deeper contextual understanding that helped me plan and conduct my field study.

**Historical Perspective**

**History of Early Childhood Education**

History is significant when understanding anything, whether family, religion, economics, society, or education. History tells us who we are and where we came from. In many ways, history informs us of what we need to know by what has either happened or is taking place at the current moment. History allows us to look at the different perspectives on the topic at the center of our investigation and things that were done to change and reform it prior and then try to figure out new ways to improve things. History reminds us that what we see now will eventually pass if we make the right choices and decisions. Without history, there is no present or future; we are constantly reminded of that in every area of life, including education.

Early childhood education began around 1830 as a way to help children living in poverty whose mothers needed to work (Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). Cahan (1989, p. 7) states, "Early education programs have … been created in the hope that they may serve as vehicles for
moving individuals out of poverty, achieving greater equality among people, and realizing other forms of desired social reform.” Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel add,

The “official” history of ECEC in the U.S. begins with two developments: (1) day nurseries (child care centers), first established in the 1830s under voluntary auspices and designed to care for the “unfortunate” children of working mothers; and (2) nursery schools, developing from the early education programs in Massachusetts also first established in the 1830s. (p. 26)

During this time, childcare workers focused on primary care, the children’s needs, and the supervision of the children (Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). Not only were these programs for children who came from low-income families, but they also began to expand during war times and then declined when the wars ended (Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel, 2007).

Cahan (1989) talks about the intertwining of childcare programs and the child welfare system.

The interweaving of pedagogical, welfare, and reform motives in preschool programs in 18th- and 19th-century Europe and the United States was quite explicit. In particular, these programs often viewed early education as the lever for the individual reform assumed to underlie the passage from poverty to prosperity. (p. 7)

According to Cahan, poorer children tended to receive programs that were just as poor in quality, while those with more money could afford to go to programs of higher quality.

Higher quality programs remain those created for the purpose of enriching or supplementing the child’s development, and the poorer quality programs tend to be those created for the purpose of providing custodial care while parents work outside of the home. (p. 7)
Essentially, Cahan discusses how childcare programs were started for people experiencing poverty but also recognizes the disparities that took place in the system early on.

The 19th century is when the first infant school began in the United States. During this time, there were two different groups that had two different motives when it came to how these schools should have been run. Cahan (1989) quotes Tank (1980) and their idea about the two groups, “One group promoted early education with the argument that lower-income families were incapable of properly socializing their children,” which was considered as “poverty track educational institutions” (p. 10). “The second group based its support for early education on the potential benefits that would accrue to young children from a program attuned to their developmental needs—one that also prepared them for elementary school” (p. 11).

It was back in the 1820s and 1830s that promoted infant education as a sort of head start. Still, eventually, those “child-centered” enrichment programs mainly supported middle- and upper-class American society. As time progressed, “increasing attention began to be focused on the special knowledge and understanding of children that women were presumed to bring to the task of educating the young child” (Cahan, 1989, p. 12). Cahan mentions that the number of day nurseries increased between 1878 and 1916 in the United States. These nurseries were meant to help children by keeping their families intact.

**History of Teacher Preparation**

The first formal teacher education school in America started in Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1839 (Helton, 2008). This program was meant to prepare elementary school teachers and was based on the influence of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Pestalozzi “…believed that teachers should not impose learning on a child, but rather employ children’s senses to guide their learning (Coble, Edelfelt, and Kettlewell, 2004, as cited by Helton, 2008). Pestalozzi
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created their training schools to help teachers learn the essential techniques to guide children's learning. These schools would model how they should work with and interact with children, which began the onset of teacher education (as cited by Helton, 2008). Coble et al. (2004) discussed how “the development of teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities trailed the normal school movement” (as cited by Helton, 2008). Helton cites Coble et al. and describes the normal school as “a place where the rules and principles of educating students were taught; hence formal public teacher education began” (p. 2).

The normal school was a place where the prospective elementary school teachers studied the subjects they would teach (such as the Bible and orthography), learned teaching methodology, and practiced teaching in model schools for up to one year prior to accepting responsibility for a class of students (Coble et al., 2004). The normal school focused on the art or craft of teaching, a practice in which pre-service teachers were taught to use intuition and their personal understanding of a situation to guide instruction. (Doyle, 1990, as cited by Helton, 2008, p. 2)

It wasn’t until after the second decade of the 20th century that colleges and universities decided to focus on preparing teachers other than those that would teach high school (as cited by Helton, 2008, p. 3). Since then, the number of teacher preparation programs has grown tremendously.

In the United States, teachers are often prepared to teach through teacher preparation programs, which then equip teacher candidates with the tools needed to succeed in the classroom setting, preparing them to work with students K-12. “The role of teacher preparation programs is to ensure that candidates are effectively prepared in knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be an effective educator” (Cummins and Asemppapa, 2013, p. 99). However, early childhood
education teachers were often prepared slightly differently. Brown, Cheddie, Horry, and Monk (2017) affirm:

Professionals in the field of early childhood education include individuals who provide direct services to young children (from birth through age 8) and their families, as well as those who administer the programs in which these individuals work (NAEYC, n.d.). Being a professional in this field encompasses the standards of education and training that prepare early childhood teacher candidates with the specific knowledge and skills necessary to perform the role of an early childhood educator. (p. 177)

**From The Past To The Future: Have Things Changed? Or Still the Same?**

The development of teacher preparation programs from day one has had many of the same concerns that we have now when it comes to preparing teaching candidates to teach in early childhood education. This has been proven in the research conducted by Blank (2010) that addresses these contemporary issues within a historical context of preparing teachers and the quality of their education. According to Blank, states had to invest in an increased number of these programs over the past decade because there was a heightened need for childcare programs in the United States. This happened because they started to see an increase in the number of women who became a part of the workforce outside of their homes and could use childcare to support them as they worked (Blank, 2010).

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, the government asked similar questions as they began expanding these programs, thinking about quality education. Some of those questions included, “What constitutes a well-qualified early childhood teacher?” which looked at the qualifications of teachers while also looking at the nature of high-quality teaching, which looks at how teachers teach (Blank, 2010, p. 391). Believe it or not, these are some of the same
questions and issues currently being raised regarding teacher preparation programs. Cunningham (n.d.) writes:

Faculty in early childhood teacher preparation find themselves with two major challenges. First, there is a struggle to articulate a professional knowledge base for early childhood education that will best prepare educators to face the demands of teaching in an increasingly dynamic, technological, and diverse society. Simultaneously, there is the challenge to design instructional models that will effectively help teachers acquire the common core of knowledge and abilities that they will need to teach young children now and in the future. Many teacher education programs are exploring the promises and practices of developmentally appropriate pedagogy for preparing pre-service teachers. (p. 52)

In addition, the past research on teacher preparation programs in the United States before the 21st century focused on three broad questions, which were: “the curriculum question,” “the effectiveness question,” and “the knowledge questions” (Cochran-Smith and Villegas, 2015, p. 379). These questions allowed researchers to focus on some of the essential qualities they felt teachers should hold and aspects that programs should offer. For example, Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) discussed each of these areas individually. The curriculum “question had two general forms: “What are the core traits of effective teachers, and are these appropriately reflected in a teacher education curriculum?” and “What are the contents and emphases of the curriculum across teacher education institutions, programs and state requirements?”” (p. 382). The effectiveness question on teaching preparation was:

What are the teaching training processes (i.e., training techniques, methods, or approaches) that lead consistently to desired teacher training products, defined as teacher
candidates’ ability to demonstrate in classroom or simulated settings techniques and methods that empirical research has shown to be effective? (p. 383)

Lastly, Cochran-Smith and Villegas note the knowledge question “emerged partly in response to perceived flaws in previous research wherein teaching was regarded as technical and teacher preparation as training” (p. 383). The questions “What should teachers know and be able to do?” and “What is/should be the knowledge based of teacher education?” pushed programs to focus on what teacher candidates knew and how they learned to teach, as opposed to what they did (p. 384). These three main questions presented by Cochran-Smith and Villegas were used as a base to inform teaching practices and teacher education programs for the future.

Furthermore, when early childhood teacher preparation programs were started, they recognized that it was a unique field requiring special preparation (Blank, 2010). Early childhood education is a field that requires teachers to be attentive to their students and focus on their individuality. Cunningham (n.d.) talks about developmentally appropriate practice (DAP):

It consists of the dimensions of age-appropriateness and individual-appropriateness. An understanding that occurs along a number of different dimensions---physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic, among others---and that development along these dimensions does not necessarily occur at the same age for each child, is the essence of DAP. This understanding serves as a framework from which teachers prepare experiences and the learning environment. (p. 52)

Knowing that teachers need special training, Blank discusses how there was “tension as early childhood education joined larger streams of educational thought in formal schooling” (p. 394). The researchers’ main focus was whether teachers should be trained in the main school system or separately since there was different experience needed to prepare early childhood
educators, a part of the pre-k expansion plan. This idea on how and where teachers should be trained resulted in a massive focus on preparing qualified teachers who would eventually work in federal and state-funded programs. However, this does not seem to have answered the questions that were posed earlier. If this movement was to help our teachers become better and more qualified to be in the classroom, why are we still having these same issues now? This situation makes me wonder what has changed or has not changed when preparing teachers. Yes, I know that things like this take time to see what works and does not, but I do not believe we should still have the same problems. However, they often say that history repeats itself; therefore, I guess it should be expected.

**Contemporary Early Childhood Education and Teacher Preparation Programs**

A lot of my ideas have come from the study of history pertaining to early childhood education teacher preparation programs. Blank (2010) mentions, “heightened awareness of historical themes in early childhood teacher education can inform early childhood teacher educators as they address contemporary issues in pre-K teacher preparation” (p. 392). This quote reminds me that history can inform our current practices, take a closer look at what has already been done, and use that to improve our current teacher preparation programs. Like kindergarten teacher educators over a century ago, contemporary early childhood educators face questions about what constitutes a well-qualified teacher and high-quality teaching and how this is recognized and enhanced.

One historical theme in early childhood teacher education — legitimization via degree programs — brought to light a tension between achieving status and maintaining a unique identity (Blank, 2010). The tension raised the problem of articulating the relationship between kindergarten and the primary grades: Should early childhood teacher educators prepare early
childhood teachers to work successfully within existing schools (with their emphasis on academics and a priori evaluation) or transform them (with developmental discourses of early childhood)? A second theme — evolving discourses of “best practices” — illuminated a tension between representations of teaching as technical practice or as contextual decision-making (Blank, 2010), raising the question: If good teaching is situated and value-laden, how do we recognize “high-quality teaching?” Lastly, Blank emphasizes that exploring historical themes and related contemporary issues in early childhood teacher education can inform contemporary teacher educators so that they can help teachers negotiate the multiple, often contradictory discourses of schooling they encounter as they intersect early childhood and larger educational discourses. The awareness of history and related contemporary issues shows that it has been an issue within education for a while and that this is not just something that began recently. Therefore, when looking at my topic, I am trying to understand where the disconnect in teaching came from while preparing teachers, whether it happened while transferring the Knowledge with the current curriculum or when teachers put it to practice. Is it the materials and content that we use to teach candidates, or is it that they just do not understand or comprehend what development really is and how it should look in children, especially students of color? Whatever the case may be, it is never too late to make the needed changes when a need is shown through the research, especially with how we can make the curriculum part of the teacher preparation programs better. However, it is up to teacher preparation programs to determine the immediate needs of our students to ensure that we are meeting their needs and that we will not keep repeating history over and over.

**Early Childhood Education Teacher Preparation Programs**
According to Buettner, Hur, Jeon, and Andrews (2015), no matter whether teacher candidates are enrolled in a two-year or four-year program, specific standards should be included within those programs that produce effective teachers that will provide quality education. The two major sets of standards (NAEYC standards and CDA competencies) that Buettner et al. (2015) suggest that are fundamental to early childhood education teachers and should be included in all programs are:

1. Knowledge of *child development* is fundamental to the work of early childhood teachers.
2. Teachers’ understanding of children’s *social and emotional development* is critical in early childhood education.
3. Early childhood teachers need to be *well-organized managers* who run the classroom and the program purposively to support children’s learning and development.
4. It is important that early childhood teachers have knowledge, skills, and confidence in working with *families and communities* to build supportive relationships and to engage families and others in the education of young children.
5. Early childhood teachers also need to have knowledge of *pedagogy* and the ability to put it into practice by designing and implementing *curricula*.
6. Teachers’ knowledge regarding *observation and assessment* of children’s learning and development is important in terms of facilitating optimal learning experiences.
7. Teachers’ sense of *professionalism*, or having a professional identity, is another factor in ensuring the quality of early childhood education. (p. 158-160)

Below, I will discuss the differences in how teacher candidates are prepared, whether they attend a two-year or four-year institution, and if having a practicum change educators’ preparedness to begin work within the field. Sumrall, Scott-Little, La Paro, Pianta, Burchinal, Hamre, Downer, and Howes (2016) discuss the differences between two-year and four-year institutions:

2-year programs generally hold responsibility for preparing the early childhood workforce to be in community child care programs and possibly as teaching assistants in public school programs, and 4-year programs often offer a program which results in a teaching license allowing teachers to teach in public school programs. (p. 828)

**Two-Year Institutions**

Two-year institutions of higher learning are often considered community colleges and offer degrees such as associates to their students with the basics. According to Bradley (2008), two-year colleges are filling the void with a wide variety of programs intended to increase the supply of talented teachers. These institutions offer many of the same programs you would find in a four-year institution; however, the information or content given to the students is not as in-depth. For example, when it comes to how teacher candidates complete a practicum, those that attend a two-year institution spend less time in their placements. In addition, “almost a quarter of 2-year programs do not have a prior practicum experience, which may be a point to examine in these programs (Sumrall et al., 2016). The cooperating teachers (or mentors) they train with also offer different qualifications (e.g., they mainly hold an associate’s degree without a license). This indicates that teacher candidates who attend this kind of institution have a “different student
teaching experience than students in 4-year programs” (p. 828). According to research here, it appears that two-year institutions are used as a way to introduce teachers to the field, as opposed to fully equipping them for the workforce. They are taught the bare minimum, which puts them in the space of not feeling confident in the classroom compared to other institutions since their access to more in-depth training is lacking.

**Four-Year Institutions**

Sumrall et al. assert, “4-year programs often offer a program which results in a teaching license allowing teachers to teach in public school programs” (2016, p. 828). Due to four-year institutions offering teacher candidates licenses once they complete their program, the experience they receive is more in-depth and tailored toward(s) teaching. There are many benefits for both teacher candidates who attend these programs and the students they will teach. Fromberg (1999) writes that the significance of early childhood teacher certification shows:

> It is possible to see a correlation between the successful educational progress of children and those states that have adopted the curricular recommendations of the National Association for the Education of Young Children in their early childhood teacher certification guidelines. (p. 35)

Lobman, Ryan, and McLaughlin (n.d.) also write:

> Children who are educated by teachers with both a bachelor’s degree and specialized training in child development and early education have been found to be more sociable, exhibit a more developed use of language, and perform at a higher level on cognitive tasks than children who are cared for by less qualified adults. (p. 1)
Essentially, Lobman et al. indicate(s) that the students of teacher candidates who complete a four-year institution with a license experience better classroom teaching and teachers who better understand child development and how to implement lesson planning.

**Practicum Experience**

In teacher preparation programs, practicum experience is used as on-site training to equip teaching candidates to work in early childhood classrooms with children ages birth to five. This experience is typically used as a place where teaching candidates can put what they learned in the classroom into practice. La Pora et al. (2017) writes:

> Early childhood teacher preparation presents some unique challenges for consideration in the preparation and development of effective teachers in their practicum experiences; early childhood teachers may work with children across a range of ages and development, and in a range of settings such as Head Start, community child care, public pre-K classrooms in public school settings, and cooperating teachers may have varied education levels and have taken a variety of pathways to becoming a teacher. (p. 366)

Sumrall et al. (2016) state, “The culminating classroom-based experience, generally termed “student teaching,” is an important component in teacher preparation” (p. 821).

Practicum experiences or “student teaching,” as Sumrall et al. mention, is typically where teacher candidates can turn their theoretical knowledge into practice, the chance and opportunity for them to take what they have learned throughout their two- and four-year programs. “Student teaching, …occurs near the end of a student’s program and offers an opportunity to practice or apply what one has learned in a classroom setting under the supervision of an experienced classroom teacher” (Sumrall et al., 2016, p. 822). This experience essentially has become one of the most significant components of teacher preparation programs. Sumrall et al. also suggests
that through this experience, students apply teaching strategies they have learned through coursework, experience new challenges, and receive support and guidance from a teacher who is experienced in the classroom setting (Sumrall et al., 2016).

There are several perspectives that teacher candidates are taught or should be taught while participating in their practicum experience. La Pora et al. (2017) discuss the different elements that support teacher candidates in having good experiences. The first point is the teacher candidate's relationship with their cooperating teacher. Through this relationship, the teacher candidate’s experience is either made or broken. La Pora et al. also propose that communication is a significant part of a successful practicum experience. How can one engage in this experience without communicating with the one set to be your mentor when you are in the classroom? Under the umbrella of communication is where support, feedback, and information sharing take place (La Pora et al., 2017). These three components are essential to ensuring that teacher candidates have the capacity to work with children and implement developmentally appropriate practices.

Instead of using a regular practicum experience approach, Linn and Jacobs (2015) look at transforming the effectiveness of early childhood teacher candidates through the lens of an inquiry-based field experience. During this field experience, Linn and Jacobs ran a mixed-methods case study to look at ways to enhance “the development of highly effective teachers” as they used intentional learning strategies to prepare them. Through this study, they found that,

Inquiry-based field experiences positively contributed to the participants’ (a) understanding and application of core knowledge, (b) consciousness of teacher-child interactions, (c) appreciation of co-inquiry, and (d) utilization of reflective learning.
Inquiry-based field experiences also positively contributed to the participants’ professional intentionality and discernment. (p. 272)

Linn and Jacobs indicate that having an inquiry-based field experience is the best practice for teaching candidates in early childhood education. This not only helps teacher candidates understand the coursework better but requires them to have a diverse knowledge inside scale and continue inquiry to fulfill their complex role in education. “Field experiences are crucial to teachers’ ability to facilitate developmentally appropriate learning and achieve desired outcomes for all children” (Linn and Jacob, 2015, p. 274). Linn and Jacobs also write:

Inquiry-based teacher preparation programs enhance teacher candidates’ learning by integrating: meaningful exposure to theory; practical application of constant knowledge of the engaging field experience; guided exposure to research-based teaching; opportunities to observe, interact, investigate, and inquire; goal-oriented data collection and analysis of teaching experiences; and collaboration and communication with peers and experienced professionals. (p. 274)

Practicum experience for teacher candidates tends to offer them more than just working with the children but an opportunity to become a part of the classroom community. As mentioned above by Linn and Jacobs, this experience is one of the most significant and vital parts of teacher preparation programs because it enhances the teaching candidates’ awareness of their role in every area while in the classroom.

**What Ideologies Represent Early Childhood Education**

Lubeck (1996) discussed how the understanding of child development and teacher preparation programs have come to be understood in ways that place limits on how we think about children and the preparation of teachers. For example, the assumptions of child
development and teacher preparation consist and place limits on what both the individual and education can and might be while also adding the modernist and post-modernist aspects when it comes to educating and preparing teaching candidates. The post-modern approach reveals there is a growing awareness that the reality we share is socially constructed and believes that teacher preparation, like education generally, involves learning to think critically and to interrogate the assumptions that underlie any and all knowledge claims, in particular regarding their usefulness in the creation of a more equitable society. Essentially, it is about becoming reflective practitioners that teachers learn to tailor their practices to their student’s diverse needs and view reality through the lens of society.

Modernist notions lay the foundation for an early childhood discourse that constructs children and early education practice itself in particular ways. Modernists have defined experiences that tend to construct reality so that, for example, subjective knowledge (feelings, intuition) is discounted, and abstract knowledge is privileged over the knowledge that comes from active and subjective involvement in the world. “What is at issue is a fundamental rethinking of the nature and purpose of a democratic society, and, in this task, both how and what we teach are strongly implicated (Giroux, 1991a)” (Lubeck, 1996, p. 148).

Again, education here involves the ability to think critically and to interrogate the assumptions that underlie knowledge claims and that theories should be evaluated in terms of their usefulness in creating a more equitable society. This approach shows the importance of how reconstructing these programs through the lens of society will hopefully be a reform or transformation for teacher preparation programs. Based on the above, the social reconstruction ideology seems to fit with how post-modernist see teacher preparation programs as a way to make society more equitable. They train teaching candidates to think more critically and become
more knowledgeable on societal issues. As Schiro (2013) states, post-modernist believes that “education provides the means by which society is to be reconstructed” (p. 152).

What’s Happening in Classrooms

As an early childhood classroom observer, I get the privilege of seeing hundreds of different teaching styles and practices in infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms throughout Chicago. This has been the highlight of my job for the past four years. The interactions I experience between teachers and students range from high-quality to not-so-high quality. In my opinion, high-quality care means that the teachers are supportive, caring, respectful of the different cultures in their classrooms, aware of the different learning styles and needs of the students, attentive, let students have a voice, and are understanding. However, those not-so-high-quality classrooms could mean that teachers are not supporting students’ learning styles, are not culturally responsive in their teaching practices, and are not giving students autonomy or incorporating student ideas or their wants in the classroom.

So, what am I really seeing, you might ask, in these classrooms? I’m glad you asked. Aside from what was mentioned above, the realness of the situation is that I have seen teachers who are not prepared to support the group of students they are working with. I have seen teachers who feel their way is the right way of doing things. I have also seen teachers who allow students no input in their activities on a daily basis. Now, I understand that some things are out of the teacher’s control. However, there are plenty of things that the teacher can control in the classroom, like allowing students to be a part of the classroom community and incorporate their voices in some way, shape, or form.

Spies (2011) asks a question that was so profound in her work, “So in this world of best practice, why do African American students continue to fail?” (p. 121). I think this is a loaded
question and cannot be answered right now. However, I believe that our students continue to fail because teachers and schools are so busy focusing on the curriculum that they forget about the students and what they need to succeed in a thriving learning environment. While researching, I’ve often seen this idea of best practices focusing on teaching, not the students. Why can’t this be the importance and basis of education? Spies explains it below:

Such a push for the implementation of best practice in U.S. classrooms has created a synonymous interchange of best practice and pedagogy, leaving the instructional strategies and instructional style of the classroom as organic afterthoughts that lack consistency and fail to meet the learning styles of students in the classroom. (p. 121)

I’m sure at this point you’re asking what best practices are and where did teachers get this idea to use them instead of being attentive to the student’s needs. Well, Spies discusses how there is an assumption that “best practice is a comprehensive magic pill that cures all that ails public education” (p. 121). In addition to that fact, “educators are so caught up in what a theorist deems as the “best” for all kids, that they often fail to critique the practice against what we know about our learners” (p. 121). Spies brings up a good point about being so busy trying to teach the curriculum that they forget to critique the practices regarding our learners. I wonder if education changed this, how differently would things be in the classroom, and how much more would our students be successful? In addition, Spies talks about how school administrators monitor classrooms using different fidelity checks but are “never really looking deep enough to see how students are responding” (p. 121). This is an element that is really missing, the student’s responses during the lessons that are being taught. How can a teacher know if a student is getting or understanding the lesson if they are not attentive to whether or not they understand the material being presented? Or better yet, if they have the capacity to learn it in the way that the
teacher is teaching it. Again, if teachers and administrators are not looking deeply into the students, then how are they attentive to the students at all? They can’t be, and they won’t!

I understand that teachers and administrators cannot always do what they need to do for the students because they, too, have a lot of different pressures and accountabilities that impact their being 100% responsive to students. Most of the time, these pressures and accountabilities come from the policies set in place by different governments, which I discuss below. Having to meet the many different deadlines set before them causes them to miss the students that are in front of them as well.

Spies (2011) writes:

It appears that our fidelity checklists and literal implementation of best practices serve as a mask to conceal the fact that we educators do not know how to create a classroom and curriculum that is culturally sensitive and relevant to African American learners while maintaining the highest standards and increasing the rigor of instruction. (p. 121)

Essentially, Spies is saying that education has not thought through how to support African American students in the classroom setting in a culturally sensitive way. Most times, schools do not have the power to control what happens in their classrooms. There are several policies in place that tell them how to conduct the learning environment. Loving (1970) talks about how the boards of education give power to the local level to create the principles and rules of what will take place in their schools. “The state legislation have proceeded to think and plan for the people” (p. 8), which often connects back to Spies's theory that education does not know how to support African American students. In addition, “…often absent are efforts that highlight the importance of culture as a pedagogical practice in the educational setting” (Strickland-Dixon,
2011, p. 113). However, I wonder if they don’t think it’s necessary or worth it since it may be too much to try to meet the needs of every student instead of meeting the standards.

“The model classroom, while exemplary in strategy implementation, fails to acknowledge that African American students are not passive learners” (Spies, 2011, p. 121). This lets us know that the approach classrooms typically use with African American students is not conducive to their learning most of the time. According to Spies, these students learn through collaboration and opportunities to share their ideas compared to silently listening to teachers and not being actively involved.

“A best practice is rendered ineffective, or worse, kids are labeled as “unteachable” because we have failed to consider that effective pedagogy is about the learner, not about the instructional strategy” (Spies, 2011, p. 122). Strickland-Dixon (2011) also writes,

The current structure sustains educational inequities to the extent that many African American students are the recipients of inferior instruction. It is unfortunate that teachers fail to possess the experiences, resources, and materials needed to effectively educate students of color in urban settings (Jordan and Cooper, 2003). As a result of inequities, many existing constraints affect the academic success of African American students in urban settings. (p. 113)

Strickland-Dixon (2011) also addresses that the current curriculum we use in most school systems does not reflect the culture of African American students. “Culture plays a significant role in the patterns by which language is introduced, learned, and used” (Hayes and Price, 2000, as cited by Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 114). “Current constraints within the curriculum promote quiet classrooms as a standard that quality education is being provided through a well-managed classroom” (Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 114). Strickland-Dixon writes:
Educators are at a loss regarding how to appropriately educate students who possess the need for expressively engaged curriculum that celebrates heritage, culture, and legacies of strength. Within the current educational setting, expressive and creative skills of students are not embraced nor integrated into the curriculum. Culture is often absent from portions of the curriculum such as writing, art, and history; incorporating students’ culture could greatly enhance the delivery of instruction through engaging them by highlighting the significance of their culture. Because of the absence of culture in the curriculum, African American students experience cultural disconnects in school; as a result, they become disengaged from the curriculum, which results in low student achievement, increased dropout rates, and greater risks of incarceration (Davis, 2003; Ogbu, 1987). As African American students continue to exhibit deficits in the area of academic achievement, shallow efforts have been made to address this crisis from a culturally relevant perspective. (p. 114)

Based on the research I’ve read, this “model classroom” approach currently taking place in education leans more toward the scholar academic ideology. According to Schiro (2013), this ideology “involves teaching children “the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world” as a culturally literate adult” (p. 15). However, the concerns of this ideology do not focus on the student but rather on getting things done in the classroom by teaching an academic discipline that aligns with meeting curriculum standards and goals. For example, “scholar academics make “subject matter,” which they conceive to be the essence of the academic disciplines, their central concern while creating curricula. In doing so, other concerns about society, the learner, and the learning process become of secondary importance” (Schiro, 2013, p. 23). Just like what is being seen through this “model classroom” approach, students and the
learning process are secondary to what needs to be taught. Why should the goal focus so much on meeting the curriculum in an academic discipline instead of thinking about the students and their needs while learning? Learners and the learning process should not have to come second nature to schools and teachers.

What Should Be Happening in Classrooms

Contrary to the above, early childhood classrooms, from my perspective, should support who the student is as an active learner in their environment (Schiro, 2013). When observing some effective classrooms, I have seen teachers aware of students, their learning styles, and who they were as individuals. They take the time to scaffold the student’s learning, allowing them to be active participants in their environment by letting them give their input on what they want to do in the classroom. Instead of focusing so much on the “model classroom” and “best practices,” early childhood classrooms should focus more on the learner-centered approach. These classrooms should be the time when students are learning to become autonomous beings.

However, being learner-centered requires teachers to be sensitive to their students and implement things that are culturally responsive to them and their learning. Schiro (2013) describes this approach as the ability to focus on the “needs and concerns of individuals” (p. 5). Here, the students explore their independent interests and converse with their peers while the teacher observes what is happening in the classroom. The teachers build the curriculum from there (Schiro, 2013). “In the learner-centered school, the needs and interests of learners, rather than those of teachers, principals, school subjects, parents, or politicians, play a major role in determining the school programs” (Schiro, 2013, p. 105). This approach allows students to almost take control of their learning by adding their input to what is being taught throughout their learning experiences. Schiro writes:
First, learner-centered schools are “child-centered institutions in contrast to the teacher-centered and principal-centered schools of the conventional order” (Rugg and Shumaker, 1928, p. 56). The interests, needs, and desires of learners influence the nature of the school program, the content of the curriculum, and (to some degree) the governance of the classroom. “These schools believe that boys and girls should share in their own government, in the planning of the program, in the administering of the curriculum, in conducting the life of the school” (p. 57). In the learner-centered school, “the routine needs of the school, as well as the lesson assignments, the planning of excursions and exhibits, and the criticism of reports are taken over by the pupils” (p. 57) to as large a degree as is judged appropriate. This is very different from the traditional school, where teachers and principals dictated all aspects of student education and students must obey their every wish promptly and unquestioningly. (p. 105)

As mentioned above, the whole point of this learner-centered ideology is to include students in their learning, not all about what teachers think students want and need. Students should be able to be an agent in their own learning experiences because there is where true education begins when children can learn from their own interests. The learner-centered ideology says, “The goal of education is the growth of individuals, each in harmony with his or her own unique intellectual, social, emotional, and physical attributes” (Schiro, 2013, p. 5).

Dewey (2018) states, “I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself” (p. 35). What does this mean? Here, Dewey explains that when students are able to participate in their learning, they not only feel as though they are a part of their learning community, but they begin to feel as if they belong. This participation alone teaches students that
they are valuable members of the classroom and that they have some sort of value in life. “The child’s own instincts and powers,” Dewey asserts, “furnish the material and give the starting point for all education” (p. 36). This is where education really begins for the student when they are a part of what takes place in the classroom. Dewey state:

To prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and really use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently. (p. 37)

According to Dewey, the student gains the necessary skills to be a social human being by having the power to control himself within his learning environment because it is there where they gain strong and healthy skills needed to be successful. Lastly, Dewey writes, “Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child’s capacities, interests, and habits” (p. 38)

An example of learner-centered education is used in my work setting. We use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a tool used to look at teacher-child interactions and their effectiveness to help improve the quality of childcare programs that promote positive classroom interactions. These interactions are “proven to drive children’s academic and life-long success” (Teachstone, 2022). The CLASS focuses on many different areas, but the two main areas supporting my research are teacher sensitivity and regard for student perspective. The authors, La Paro, Hamre, and Punta (2008), included these areas in the tool because they understood how important it is for teachers to not only be aware of the student’s needs but also, to be responsive to them. When teachers are aware of students, they have a better learning experience because they are attentive to their needs while in the classroom.
They also included regard for student perspective because they understood how important it is for students to have some input in their learning experiences. Teachers should encourage students’ voices, ideas, and autonomy throughout the learning environment (La Paro, Hamre, and Punta, 2008).

“Research has repeatedly shown that African American students are active learners that prefer cooperative learning situations in which learning is meaningful and relevant” (Howard, 2001; Kuykendall, 1991) (as cited by Spies, 2011). Spies explains the type of learning environment that is best suited for students of color and writes:

African American students excel in active, spontaneous, and dynamic learning environments, while the learning in the model classroom requires students to observe the teacher doing all the work for an extended period of time. African American students thrive in cooperative working sessions in which simultaneous talk is allowed if not encouraged, while the model classrooms praised students for silent listening and individual written responses as proof of their thinking behaviors. African American students prosper in context-based learning in which the curriculum is humanized while the model classroom encourages all students to read from the same text. (p. 121-122)

This quote from Spies indicates that students of color have to be a part of their learning process, which is the only way they will succeed in school. Spies writes, “If I view this best practice through the lens of pedagogy and place the learner at the forefront, the result is an improved best practice that is effective for African American learners” (p. 122), which means that if we change the way that education is done and focus more on the learner and their learning styles, then students of color will do a lot better in school.
Learner-Centered Leaders

Schiro (2013) mentions four European leaders who contributed to the learner-centered ideology. These include John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). John Amos Comenius “emphasized that learning is developmental and that it progresses from concrete experience to abstract thought” (p. 128). Jean-Jacques Rousseau “viewed children as naturally good and society as corrupt” (p. 128). In addition,

He believed that educations’ purpose is to nurture children’s natural goodness and powers of constructive development in such a way as to keep them free from corruption by society’s evil ways until they are adults and can withstand society’s corrupting influences. (p. 128)

Rousseau also felt learning “should proceed developmentally from direct experiences with nature to sensory experiences with concrete objects to abstract ideas; and that children’s natural growth should be the focus of education” (Schiro, p. 128).

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi “emphasized that children should be free to explore their own interests, draw their own conclusions, and have a role in directing their own education” (p. Schiro, p. 128-129). He also promoted the importance of play during learning and teaching to the whole child, an advocate of balancing and equalizing education. Lastly, Friedrich Froebel was the one who invented kindergarten. “He emphasized the education of children’s senses and perceptions in ways that are playful, enjoyable, and spontaneous” (Schiro, p. 129). He also came up with using stories, songs, games, and crafts as a form of helping students learn and play in their environment.
Culturally Responsive Teaching

According to Joseph (2011), culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a [a human] as a member of society” (p. 24). Another definition that Joseph writes states that culture is sense-making and that people create meaning, and meaning creates people as members of society (p. 24). Understanding culture is an important aspect when it comes to teaching, learning, and developing a curriculum. If you do not understand the culture you are in or work with, then it becomes hard, I feel, to teach in a community that one is unfamiliar with or even unaware of. I believe that teaching to the culture shows students that you are concerned with them and that you are interested in connecting the information for them in a way that would be meaningful to them.

Vavrus (2008) describes culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as

An educational reform that strives to increase the engagement and motivation of students of color who historically have been both unsuccessful academically and socially alienated from their public schools. Specifically, culturally responsive teaching acknowledges and infuses the culture of such students into the school curriculum and makes meaningful connections with community cultures. Culturally responsive teaching is designed to help empower children and youth by using meaningful cultural connections to convey academic and social knowledge and attitudes (p. 49).

Vavrus continues to say that “CRT is a concept that signals a need to expand the customary professional knowledge base for teachers in order to close this achievement gap” and that it is

Best understood as a response to traditional curricular and instructional methods that have often been ineffective for students of color, immigrant children, and students from lower socioeconomic families. CRT calls attention to schooling norms where White middle-
class values and expectations are privileged while other cultural backgrounds are overlooked or degenerated. In contrast to assimilationist teaching, CRT values and incorporates as appropriate a student’s culture into instruction. (p. 49)

Essentially, the author reminds us that CRT is meant to support students of color in their academic and social lives.

As Vavrus (2008) states, the purpose of CRT is “to make learning more culturally relevant and effective for this particular population of students” (p. 50). “CRT is a student-centered strategy that embraces a learning community model for the organization of a classroom” (p. 50). In addition, “a CRT goal is to actively engage all students in learning, a fundamental element of effective teaching. CRT recognizes that teacher effectiveness decreases when instruction is primarily teacher centered with an absence of student and community voices” (p. 50).

CRT doesn’t just stop at being student-centered, but it also,

Conceptualizes pedagogy as a two-way communicative process designed to decrease student passivity by placing student involvement at the center of teaching and learning. Rather than teachers defining their roles as just the transmitters of information, CRT calls on teachers to help students be active participants in the production and acquisition of knowledge. This requires teachers to acknowledge the conceptual and cultural resources or assets that culturally different students bring to their schools and then to affirm the backgrounds of all students. Without this acknowledgment and affirmation, teachers may be unable to utilize the background knowledge and experiences that students bring to their learning environments. (p. 50)
Additionally, “CRT helps in this developmentally appropriate learning process by making connections for students between schooling norms and the familiarity of home and cultural background” (p. 50).

Ultimately, it is the interaction between a teacher and a student that becomes a key learning site that can determine the degree of success for culturally diverse children and youth in public schools. For CRT, this involves purposefully incorporating aspects of the cultural perspectives of this targeted population into the everyday practices and instructional activities of the classroom. (Vavurs, 2008, p. 50)

In addition, Vavrus discusses how teachers could make CRT effective.

For effective CRT, teachers would need to expand and apply their multicultural knowledge, skills, and dispositions so that opportunities for student gains in academic achievement and a willingness to complete public school are improved. Preservice and inservice teaching education is the primary avenue by which teachers can learn how to create conditions of cultural expression that are more congruent with the backgrounds of their culturally diverse students and their families. Through CRT preparation, educators can better grasp how student cultural backgrounds affect learning and student development. This can lead to a multicultural commitment on behalf of educators, as professional disposition that is widely recognized as a foundational attitudinal component for the successful development of CRT. (p. 50)

Vavrus also states that CRT is a way to help close the disparity gaps in academic and social opportunities between students of color and White students (2008). The author also mentions that teachers must first understand the educational inequalities before they can begin closing the
achievement gap of those students who are considered low status and have inferior academic competence (Vavrus, 2008).

Furthermore, Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) write, “Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a strategy that addresses the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children” and “culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a concept that has the potential to improve the attention, engagement, and success of students of color” (p. 156). CRT is a form of teaching that reaches students and expands the teacher’s understanding of how to educate students of color authentically. Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) note(s) that teachers often use this “model classroom,” which does not reflect attentiveness to students of color or their way of learning.

Although a good amount of research indicates that students of color needs are not being met educationally, we continue not to change anything about how we prepare teachers at some institutions. Ladson-Billings’ work emphasizes that a part of pedagogy is to help these students identify who they are and to “challenge social inequities that exist in their communities” (Djonko-Moore and Traum, 2015, p. 157). But how can we combat what students of color are experiencing if educators don’t understand what they are doing with this group?

Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) quote Rychly and Graves (2012) saying, “The main characteristics that teachers need to develop include caring and empathy, the ability to reflect on their beliefs about other cultures, the ability to reflect on their own culture, and knowledge about other cultures” (p. 158). While contemplating this topic, I often wonder how we can get teachers to this place. How can we make them reflective, understanding their culture, empathetic, and caring enough to help students learn? I think the important thing is to figure out how we can implement this into a course or more that is mandatory for everyone who decides they want to teach in early childhood education or education alone. This is not the
type of field where we just roll with the flow; instead, we really have to work to ensure that we understand the population we work with. We know that the first five years of life are the most important in a child’s development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), and if they do not have properly trained educators working with them, it becomes a failed system from that point on. There will be no act put in place that can save them (e.g., NCLB). I think about myself; although I had some good teachers, I don’t ever remember any of my teachers being sensitive to me and my learning in a culturally appropriate way. I felt I always had to keep up with the “other” students without having an opportunity to process and learn the way that worked for me. I think that because I didn’t have teachers that were a part of my race and culture back then, they didn’t understand how to work with my learning style.

Essentially, it’s not all the teacher’s fault because they are just doing what they are taught and following the rules and guidelines set for them by administrators and leaders. Now that I am on the other side of education, I understand the pressure that most teachers are under. This is why this topic is so important to me because I don’t want any student of color to have to wait until they are grown and in their Master’s program to get teachers that understand how to work with them. I want them to know that they are understood and have teachers that respect them and the value they bring to the classroom.

According to the research that was done by Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015), “the participants reported missed opportunities in their coursework to learn skills that would have helped them to be culturally responsive…” (p. 159). Although many teacher preparation programs give teachers some of the tools they need to work with students, there are still areas of the programs that need to be revisited to ensure that they support teachers in this important area of work.
Nganga (2015) describes culturally responsive teaching as a way for teachers to be attentive to the academic needs of students while also responding to the sociocultural element of learning through an examination of the reality of the students. Tracy Spies (2011) discuss how teachers do not teach to the needs of all students, let alone African American students. Most of the time, when teachers teach, they teach to standards and a particular top-down curriculum considered “best practices.” Spies (2011) writes, as mentioned above, that “Gay (2002) emphatically argued that the education system “ignores the reality and relevance of the diversity of humanity and education” (p. vii)” (p. 121). This implies that education does not cater to the needs of the diverse population they serve. In addition, Spies (2011) talk about how teaching is so focused on a model classroom that they don’t focus on how students respond or whether they are getting what they need from the lesson. Essentially, the “best practices” that teachers are using are not considered to be “best practices” for African American students because their learning needs are not being met in the classroom (Spies, 2011). These ideas of culturally responsive teaching clash with the current standardization, testing, and accountability environments administrators must set.

Based on the above, how can we help teachers gain best practices when working with students of color? 1.) Teachers must be able to hear and see students for who they are. 2.) Teachers must be able to focus on meeting the students’ needs more so than teaching to standards and a curriculum that is not fitting for students of color or any student, which is a policy and systems issue.

**How To Support Early Childhood Students of Color**

Based on what we have learned throughout history and other factors when preparing teachers to work with students, we need policymakers who understand curriculum and students’
needs instead of people who are just there for power and position. According to Strickland-Dixon (2011), we have to move away from the traditional curriculum model that we tend to use when working with African American students. This model does not prove to meet the needs of these students academically, socially, and emotionally.

Scholars conveying the tragedies that exist for African American students in the public school setting would argue that the academic failure is the direct result of the public education system. The current structure sustains educational inequities to the extent that many African American students are the recipients of inferior instruction. (Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 113)

Ultimately, if we want to support all students regardless of race, status, etc., we first have to look at the current system we are using to educate them. Not only that, but looking at the policies that are used to make decisions about the curriculum used in schools. Strickland-Dixon (2011) quotes Marsh and Willis (1999), saying, “Many policy statements about curriculum limit the school’s ability to make decisions about their own individual needs” (p. 113). Until we get people in these positions that understand that the curriculum needs to cater to all students, including students of color, we will still experience the same issues when it comes to curriculum. I understand they want everyone to be on the same page, but each school should be able to form its own policies on how the curriculum should be used for the population they serve. We need to make sure that the “printed curriculum materials” we use do not “foster[s] a lack of understanding of the cultural and historical contributions made to the United States by African Americans” (Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 113). The curriculum has to address the cultural needs of all students, including students of color. The goal is to ensure that “state standards and mandates are connections to culturally
relevant pedagogy aimed at enhancing the academic experiences of students of color” (Strickland-Dixon, 2011, p. 115).

Additionally, we have to make sure that all teachers are well prepared to service this population in the classroom. So again, how can we support all students? By looking back at history, seeing what did not work, and finding a better way. In addition, by making sure that students of color’s voices are heard and that they are seen in the classroom as individuals. Although we know this will not be an easy task, it is up to us to ensure that the people in higher positions hear our concerns regarding promoting equity and equality in education.

**Summary**

Research has found that the curriculum and the way we prepare current teachers to teach are not always conducive for students of color. Researchers have noted that some of the practices we use need to be shaped differently so that all students can benefit from the classroom experience. We don’t want to focus on the top-down curriculum but instead focus on the students, their culture, and their learning styles. Also, recognizing that students of color need more support when it comes to their education and that, as educators, it is our job to figure out a way to support them.

This chapter explored the literature that supports my research’s topic on how we prepare educators to work with students of color. Research was given on the historical context of early childhood education and teacher preparation, how teachers are prepared in two-year and four-year institutions, and some of the best ways to support them while moving away from “best practices” that are not “best practices” for all students. In addition, we discussed some literature from the ideology that best represents what early childhood classrooms should look like. Lastly,
we explored culturally responsive teaching and how this framework can be applied in the classroom when working with students of color.

What’s Next?

In chapter three, I explained the methodology that I used for my research. I explained qualitative research, the methodological framework I employed, the methods I used to collect my data, my participants, ethics, and more. This chapter will be the beginning of seeking answers to my research questions.
Chapter III

Methodology and Design

In this chapter, I discussed the methodology that was used to conduct my research and reach the answers to my research questions. I explained what qualitative narrative research was, the approach I used for my study, its goal, and why this research is needed and useful. I also reviewed my research questions and the overall research design in this chapter. I described in depth the study participants, the methods I used to collect and analyze the data, the ethical guidelines, and the validity of my findings.

What is Qualitative Research?

According to Ravitch and Carl (2020), “Qualitative research uses interpretive research methods as a set of tools to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make meaning of and interpret their own experiences, themselves, each other, and the social world” (p. 2). In addition, Leavy (2017) says that “qualitative approaches to research value depth of meaning and people’s subjective experiences and their meaning-making process. These processes build a robust understanding of a topic, unpacking the meanings people ascribe to their lives---to activities, circumstances, people, and objects” (p. 124).

Looking at both of these definitions combined, qualitative research to me implies the ability to find a genuine answer to the problems that take place within society or at least, to help contribute to the solution, more specifically, in this case, education, as the researcher becomes involved in what is happening around them. Not only that, qualitative research helps the researcher to recognize and make sense of where there is “a lack.” Qualitative research is a continual process of learning and understanding gained through creating research questions that
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will help guide the research and how the researcher comes to understand the problem at hand. For example, qualitative research allows researchers to interject themselves into the study by talking directly with participants through observations, interviews, conversations, field notes, recordings, photographs, etc. (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Ultimately, most people who use this research approach are trying to explore the topic in-depth, allowing the researcher to go beyond the surface in understanding the problem, which may eventually move them toward a solution to the problem. Efron and Ravid (2013) note the different roles of qualitative research.

1.) When thinking about assumptions of school reality, “qualitative research results cannot be generalized across time and locations.”

2.) The purpose of qualitative educational research is “to gain insight into and understanding of how students, teachers, parents, and administrators make sense of their educational experience. The knowledge and insight serve as a base for bringing about needed change.”

3.) The role of the qualitative researcher is to not only become immersed in where their studies take place so that they can become familiar with the situation and their participants. In addition, “researchers must acknowledge their own personal values and how these values shape their perceptions and interpretations.” (p. 41)

4.) Lastly, the qualitative research process is where the study emerges, which includes open-ended questions and the time for the researcher to spend extended time in the setting where they will observe and interview people through daily school routines. The main focus of the research process is on a holistic understanding of the complex interdependencies that distinguish the educational, social, and cultural environments
that are being examined. They then take the collected data, analyze and organize it into different categories, trends, and patterns. (p. 40-41)

Not only does qualitative research work for the researcher, but “qualitative inquiry researchers are concerned with human feelings, experiences, and values” (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 6). Personally, I feel this aspect is essential when thinking about researching people. Education research is not just about the researchers but how they can help solve problems for others and with others. This part of the research indicates that the researcher is not just focused on the research for their own selfish gain but truly taking into account the people that are facing the daily trials of the research problems that arise. It allows for a partnership between the researcher and the participants to be built during this process as the two work together to solve the problem.

A qualitative study is the best option for my research because I want to look at how teacher preparation programs prepare early childhood educators to work with students of color from the perspective of graduates and a program coordinator of such programs. Using this approach will not just focus on my experiences and what I know when it comes to teacher preparation programs but also the experiences of current early childhood educators (e.g., program coordinators, teachers, and educators). This dissertation study examines the role that teacher preparation programs play or do not play when it comes to ensuring that educators are fully equipped with what they need to work with students of color. This research will help me look beyond what I feel or know and obtain a deeper understanding of the value and contributions of teacher preparation programs from the perspectives of people experiencing it daily: teachers and educators.
Methodology

For my research, I used a narrative inquiry approach to examine the problem. According to Ravitch and Carl (2020), “narrative research “examines human lives through the lens of a narrative, honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge” (p. 27). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) write that narrative research is meaning-making and that it shapes and orders past experiences. The authors also mention that narrative research is a way of understanding your own and others’ actions, organizing objects and events meaningfully, and connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). “In addition to describing what happened, narratives also express emotions, thoughts, and interpretations” (p. 656). Denzin and Lincoln explain that narratives are also verbal actions.

Whatever the particular action, when someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience and reality. When researchers treat narration as actively creative in this way, they emphasize the narrator’s voice(s). The word voice draws our attention to what the narrator communicates and how he or she communicates it as well as to the subject positions or social locations from which he or she speaks (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). (p. 657)

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) write that within narrative research, the focus tends to be on collecting the data through gathering stories from multiple people and reporting on their experiences chronologically based on the importance of each of those stories told. In addition, Creswell (2013) states that narratives “begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (p. 70). Creswell explains the defining features of narrative studies.
Narrative researchers collect stories from individuals (and documents and group conversations) about individuals’ lived and told experiences. Through this, a strong collaboration emerges as the researcher and participant interact and dialogue.

Narrative stories tell of individual experiences, and they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves.

Narrative stories are gathered through many different forms of data, such as through interviews, which may be the primary form of data collection, but also through observations, documents, pictures, and other qualitative data sources.

Narrative stories often are heard and shaped by the researchers into a chronology, although they may not be told that way by the participant(s).

Narrative stories are analyzed in varied ways.

Narrative stories often contain turning points of specific tensions or interruptions that are highlighted by the researchers in the telling of the stories.

Narrative stories occur within specific places or situations. The context becomes important for the researcher’s telling of the story within a place. (p. 71)

Creswell (2013) discusses several different narrative types when conducting qualitative research. “Narrative studies can be differentiated along two different lines” (p. 72). Creswell quotes Polkinghorne’s (1995) work saying that the narrative is when “the researcher extracts themes that hold across stories and taxonomies of types of stories, and a more storytelling mode in which the narrative researcher shapes the stories based on a plotline or a literary approach to analysis” (p. 72). Narratives help the audience see and understand the research through the lens and experience of the participants. The four different types of narrative research that Creswell write about are:
A biographical study is a form of narrative study in which the researcher writes and records the experiences of another person’s life.

Autoethnography is written and recorded by the individuals who are the subject of the study (Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010). Muncey (2010) defines autoethnography as the idea of multiple layers of consciousness, the vulnerable self, the coherent self, critiquing the self in social contexts, the subversion of dominant discourses, and the evocative potential. They contain the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual’s story.

Life history portrays an individual’s entire life, while a personal experience story is a narrative study of an individual’s personal experience found in single or multiple episodes, private situations, or communal folklore (Denzin, 1989a).

Oral history consists of gathering personal reflections on events and their causes and effects from one individual or several individuals (Plummer, 1983). Narrative studies may have a specific contextual focus, such as stories told by teachers or children in classrooms (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002) or the stories told about organizations (Czarniawska, 2004). Narratives may be guided by interpretive frameworks. (p. 73)

When conducting narrative research, the researcher must first decide if their research questions best fit this type of research. For my study, the oral history narrative is what I will use. Narrative research is best used when trying to capture the experiences of single individuals or a small group of individuals (Creswell, 2013). The role of the researcher is to analyze the stories, take an active role, and retell the stories using a framework that makes sense. “This framework may consist of gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place,
plot, and scene), and then rewriting the stories to place them within a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002)” (Creswell, 2013, p. 74).

The participant’s stories can also give the researcher insight into his or her life. These stories can potentially be epiphanies, turning points, or disruptions that drastically cause the storyline to change (Creswell, 2013).

In the end, the narrative study tells the story of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social, and historical context, and including the important themes in those lived experiences. “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told,” said Clandinin and Connolly (2000, p. 20). (Creswell, 2013).

Research questions

Below are the research questions. These questions guided the development of the research design that allowed me to find answers to these questions.

1.) What can we learn from early childhood educators about their preparation for working with students of color?

2.) How does a program coordinator design and implement a curriculum that helps educators support the needs of students of color?

3.) Are educators taught self-awareness that will help them be aware of their students and their cultures?

Research Design

According to Ravitch and Carl (2020), “qualitative research design is a dynamic, systematic, and engaged process of planning rigorous research that values context and criticality” (p. 63). Additionally, the research design is “the way that you, as a researcher, articulate, plan for, and set up the doing of your study” (p. 63). Furthermore, it is how one “bridges theory and
concepts with the development of research questions and the design of data collection and analysis methods for a specific study” (p. 63). Essentially, the research design is a process that lays out the research in a way that ensures every “i” is dotted and every “t” is crossed.” Ultimately, the goal of the research design is to help one thoughtfully plan out the research while giving one an in-depth study of their topic.

The start of the research design begins with your why. Why do you want to study, and why are you interested in this topic? This is important because this is where the process begins. Ravitch and Carl (2020) discuss several “key interactive” phases in qualitative research design. Chapters I and II discussed the first three (developing study goals and rationale, formulating and iterating research questions, and developing a theoretical framework). The others are listed below:

- Determining the methods you will use to answer your research questions
- Making decisions about the research setting (i.e., site) and participants who will be involved in your study
- Piloting and refining research design and methods
- Planning for validity in your research design (p. 65).

**Reflexivity**

Reflexivity happens when the researcher looks closely at how she shapes and collects data. In addition, “acknowledging the ways that researchers impact the questions asked, methods used, and data collected becomes especially important when you are collecting data” (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 107). Essentially, it is the researcher being able to examine their practices, beliefs, and judgments while completing their research. There are several processes that Ravitch and Carl mention that can help the researcher “be aware of, monitor, and address (when needed)
your role as a researcher in the entire research process and in particular when you are collecting data” (p. 107). The things listed include:

- Composing a researcher’s memo,
- Keeping a researcher journal,
- Engaging in dialogic engagement, and
- Conducting researcher interviews.

As a qualitative researcher, it is essential that I stay ahead when it comes to collecting the data by making sure I do not bring in anything that could tremendously affect my research. If I do bring something in, I am intentional about what I bring.

**Setting**

Some of the most important aspects of the study will be where the researcher will conduct their research and who they will choose to be involved. Ravitch and Carl (2020, p. 81) assert, “Research must happen somewhere, and that somewhere is important to consider directly in relation to the goals of your study and the research questions that guide it.” The researcher’s chosen place should match their research goals and help them get in-depth information for their research question(s). Does there need to be multiple sites, or will one do? The researcher needs to answer these questions when trying to locate the setting where their research will take place.

This study used a community college in Illinois that offers several different degree programs, including an early childhood teacher preparation program. The Higher Learning Commission (H.L.C.) accredited the school, which accredits degree-granting post-secondary educational institutions in the north-central region. The college is affiliated with the following organizations: the American Association of Community Colleges, Illinois Skyway Collegiate Conferences (athletics, music, art, writing), and the National Junior College Athletic Association.
The institution is a two-year community college that was founded in 1957 and began classes in 1958. The program offers degrees and programs in more than 100 fields of study. In addition to the degrees they offer, they participate in transfer degree programs and career programs (https://state.edu/about-us/index.aspx).

The child development program the school offers is a part of the Child and Family Studies Associates in the Applied Science program. This degree is designed for people that want to work directly with young children and their families in early care and education programs, human service organizations, or professional development services. The program provides both theoretical knowledge and practical skills (http://catalog.state.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=4&poid=631&returnto=234). As an Illinois Gateways to Opportunity entitled institution, completion of course requirements for the A.A.S. degree can lead to an Illinois Early Childhood Teacher Credential 2, 3, or 4. Students who pursue an Illinois Infant-Toddler Teacher Credential 1 or an Illinois Director Credential 1 can complete the requirements for those credentials through Early Childhood Education elective choices. Students are required to seek more information from the Early Childhood Education/Child and Family Studies Coordinator. In this program, students can receive a childcare teacher certificate. This program teaches the practical skills necessary to provide direct home care to young children in daycare and preschool centers, home daycare sites, and community-based centers. Students are prepared for employment as teachers, child care assistants, and other entry-level positions in the child care field. Because the college is an entitled institution, the courses in the certificate program can be used to meet Illinois Gateway Childhood Teacher credentials. (https://state.edu/academics/academic-programs/social-sciences/education/important-links.aspx - Child Development AAS). The school currently has an
enrollment of 12,226 students, comprised of 60% female and 40% male. 55% of students attend part-time, while the other 45% attend full-time.

In addition to the setting of the school, the other participants work in different low-income areas throughout Chicago (e.g., West Side and Roger’s Park). They serve a variety of different families, from African Americans to Latinos, Whites, Immigrants, and Refugees. These areas cater to increasing the resources needed by the children and families.

Participants

“Selection of the participant group requires a clear understanding of the goals of the research questions(s) in relation to the context and populations at the center of the inquiry” (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 83). Researchers tend to select their participants through purposeful sampling. These selections are based on how they could be beneficial and unique to answering the study’s questions. This also includes how many participants the researcher chooses to use. Like with any other part of the research, the researcher has to be intentional and make sure that they are reflecting on the results as they go through the process to ensure that they are getting the results they are looking for. “Given the importance of your participant pool, it is essential that as a researcher, you spend considerable time exploring and discussing with others the various benefits and challenges in choosing participants for your study” (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 84).

For this study, there were four participants. The first one is the program coordinator of an early childhood teacher preparation program at a two-year institution. The second one is an academic coach for early childhood education classrooms. The third participant is a classroom assessor who looks at teacher-child interactions at different programs throughout Chicago. Lastly, the fourth participant is a support monitor advisor at a Head Start agency in Chicago. Below, I explained more about who each participant is.
The first participant for this study is Sarah, the coordinator of an early childhood teacher preparation program at a community college. Sarah was previously an adjunct professor at the college for about two years before taking on the full-time role as the Coordinator/Assistant Professor in 2020. Not only is she the program coordinator, but she also serves on many different boards throughout the state that are working to address the teacher shortage and prepare high-quality teachers in the process. She is a biracial female in her 40s with a doctorate in Educational Leadership. Before this job, she worked in various occupations such as social services and child welfare, federal programs, early head start (EHS) and head start (HS), and Institutions of Higher Education. Sarah also expressed willingness to be a part of her program and to serve as a participant in this study.

Initially, I thought about talking with students who had just completed their teacher preparation program and who are now teaching to see if they thought their program reflected culturally responsive teaching (C.R.T.) when it came to working with students of color. However, as I continued to ponder what I wanted to find out for this study, I thought, why not start with the source, the one who sets up the courses and determines what classes are taught and not taught each semester? I want to get the background of the program and curriculum before talking with students. Therefore, this participant was chosen because I wanted to look at how the curriculum is created in higher education programs and whether or not the curriculum reflected CRT through their eyes. I also wanted to understand how administrators understood CRT and how this understanding and knowledge is reflected in their program.

In addition to the program coordinator, I looked at three early childhood educators who have gone through an early childhood education program and are currently working in the field with students of color and have been doing it for several years. These educators include an
academic coach, a classroom assessor who observes teacher-child interactions, and a monitor and support specialist for a Head Start program.

The second participant is Jackie, who is an academic coach. She is an African American woman who lives in a northern suburb of Chicago. She is 45 years old and holds a B.A. in communication, MAT in elementary education, and an Ed.S in curriculum and instruction. Jackie has worked in education for 15 years and has served in many different roles (e.g., primary classroom teacher, assessor and training specialist, and academic coach). Jackie expressed willingness to serve as a participant in this study.

The third participant is Tiff. Tiff is a classroom assessor who is an African American woman who lives in the south suburbs of Chicago but travels throughout Chicago to visit and assess different schools. She is in her 40s and participating in a fellowship. Tiff holds a certificate in coaching and mentoring, a master’s degree in education with instructional leadership, a bachelor’s in elementary education, and a technical assistance level 5 credential. Before working as an assessor, she was an assistant director of a lab school in downtown Chicago. Tiff expressed willingness to serve as a participant in this study.

The last participant, Lisa, is a 28-year-old White woman. She holds a bachelor of science from Washington University in St. Louis and a master’s degree in early childhood education from Dominican University. She participated in Teach for America in Illinois as it was a requirement for her teacher preparation program. For the past several years, she has held a few roles in the early childhood field, from a support monitoring advisor, an assessor and training specialist, and a preschool teacher.

These participants were chosen because of their various experiences within the field and experience in early childhood teacher preparation programs that lacked culturally responsive
teaching. Each participant has a solid understanding of early childhood education and knows what it takes for students and teachers to succeed in the field. They also understand the importance of working with students of color and how important it is for the curriculum to be effective in supporting their growth and development.

**Data Collection Methods**

How will a qualitative researcher collect the data for their research? The method(s) the researcher chooses is very important because they influence the data needed to support their research questions. Therefore, the researcher’s methods need to be carefully thought out before choosing. Below, I described the sources of data that I used in this study.

I conducted in-depth semi-structured/structured interviews and analyzed document collection. According to Stake (2005), “qualitative interviews parallel quantitative observations: They seek to aggregate perceptions or knowledge over multiple respondents” (p. 65). Stake (2005) also tells us that interviews are “the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). When thinking about my topic and my research questions, I interviewed a coordinator of a teacher preparation program and three early childhood educators who work in programs with students of color and have completed teacher preparation programs. This helped me understand their position and where they stood with feeling prepared. This allowed me the opportunity to dig deeper into the curriculum, how educators feel about themselves, and what they understood or took away from their programs to carry with them in the classroom. It also helped me understand where they felt the lack was and how they think it could be better. It also gave me a chance to talk to them specifically about their courses and where they felt more support could be given when working with students of color within the curriculum.
A semi-structured interview process that I used to collect data was flexible and allowed other questions to be asked that came up during the process. Some questions included asking participants about their experience in their teacher preparation programs, the areas where they felt their program lacked in the curriculum when preparing them to work with students of color, how they felt culturally responsive teaching was represented in their program (if any), and why they feel that programs don’t exclusively prepare them to work with a certain population (see Appendix A for the complete interview guide). During the interview, I sat down with the participants via Zoom for two sessions each. I asked several questions pertaining to curriculum and culturally responsive teaching to get a better feel for what it looked like in their program. Some of the questions asked are below:

1) Tell me about yourself.
   a. What made you want to become a teacher?
   b. What motivated you to get into ECE?

2) Tell me about your family.

3) Tell me about your experience with young children.

4) Tell me about your education.
   a. What was your experience in the program?
   b. What was your school?
   c. How did you decide to major in ECE?
   d. How were your relationships with peers and teachers?

5) Do you feel your program prepared you to work with students of color? Explain.

6) Did any of your classes reflect culturally responsive teaching or self-awareness?
   a. If so, which one? Tell me about it.
   b. How much is used in your current work? Please provide an example.

7) Where do you feel your program lacked or excelled when preparing you to work with students of color? Can you give me an example(s) to demonstrate that?

8) Tell me about your experience when you first began working with students of color. Please give me an incident and explain.
   a. Was it what you expected? Explain.
9) What are some things you wish you had learned in your teacher preparation program to prepare you for working with students of color? Explain.

10) Do you think self-awareness is important? Why?

11) From your perspective, do you feel that your program taught the importance of self-awareness and understanding who you are? Explain.
   a. How does learning this benefit your work with students of color?

12) Were you taught to understand a student’s culture in order to support their learning? Explain.

13) How important is it for preparation programs to begin including culturally responsive teaching in their courses? Why or why not?

14) How do you support students of color in the classroom?
   a. Books, community, voice, encourage, support, cherish backgrounds
   b. Parents
   c. Violence?

15) Do you think that the current curriculum in teacher preparation programs supports preparing educators to work with students of color? Why or why not?

16) What would you add or change in the program to improve cultural teacher awareness and support their work with students of color?

With there being several questions that were asked, each session lasted between 1-2 hours. The interviews were recorded on multiple devices to ensure nothing was lost or left out. These questions allowed the participants to tell their stories concerning their experiences in both the classroom and their preparation programs.

In addition to the interview, I collected several artifacts from the program coordinator’s school website. The first document I looked at was the one that shows the two options students have when they enter the program: an A.A.S. Degree in Child and Family Studies and the Child Care Teacher Certificate. The following document was the learning outcomes and objectives for the Child Development Preschool Teacher Certificate, the Child Development Director
Certificate, and the Child Development AAS. The last document I reviewed looked at the curriculum for the entire program. This document allowed me to see the required courses that students take during their studies.

Analysis of the Data

According to Ravitch and Carl (2020), “Qualitative data analysis is the intentional, systematic scrutiny of data at various stages and moments throughout the research process” (p. 234). Critical qualitative data analysis recognizes that the data analysis continues throughout the entire research process, starting with the first piece of data that is collected. “The cyclical nature of qualitative data analysis commences at the beginning of data collections continues throughout as the process of collecting data transitions into summative data analysis once all data are collected” (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 235). This process allows the researcher to identify, examine, and interpret the themes and patterns found in the data. Although qualitative research is considered interpretative, analysis and interpretation can be merged within this process to get the best out of the study.

Additionally, this process allows the researcher to explore their topic in even more depth as they review the collected data. However, there are some challenges that may arise when analyzing data. Ravitch and Carl (2020) inform the researcher:

A challenge when analyzing qualitative data is to engage with and make sense of a significant corpus of data in a process that carefully reduces the amount of data, identifies significant patterns in those data, and does so in a way that allows you to construct an analytic framework for communicating the essence of what your data reveal (Patton, 2015). (p. 235)
I can understand why this could be challenging when analyzing the data, especially when there is a lot of data collected; trying to break each part down, find themes and connections, and suggest implications from what you have for the next steps or future research. This can sometimes cause the researcher to disengage from the research because they may not know where to start when there is such a wealth of information that one needs to dissect.

In addition to the above, the authors also gave researchers several critical points to consider when they are critically analyzing their data.

- Acknowledge the iterative, recursive, and ongoing nature or data analysis.
- Pay careful attention to participants’ and researcher’s language, context(s), and perspective.
- Understand the role of and engage in formative analysis in the further development of data collection instruments and to understand emergent themes so that they can be attended to during data collection processes.
- Understand the relationship between data sources/data collection processes and the nature and content of the data set.
- Engage in triangulation—in terms of data and theory—data analysis processes.
- Seek out and engage with disconfirming evidence.
- Discuss your analyses with thought partners, paying attention to researcher identity, positionality, and assumptions.
- Attend to issues of interpretive authority in systematic ways in an effort to resist its imposition as much as possible. (p. 235)

Reading the above considerations from the authors reminded me of how important it is for the researcher to be an authentic part of this process. It appears that this process helps the researcher
understand the collected data, the relationship between themselves and their participants, and their individual roles. It also allows them to dive deep into what they saw or didn’t see and be more engaging in different components within the analysis process.

**Data Analysis in Dissertation**

For my dissertation research, my source of data collection was interviews and document artifacts. I used a transcription service (e.g., Otter.ai) to transcribe the interview data so that I could break it down and analyze it properly. Ravitch and Carl (2020) say, “When researchers speak of transcript, they are referring to a mode of representing a piece of data that has been gathered. Data refers to material that has been collected (or generated) in the course of research, while transcription is the process of rendering that data into a new representational form” (p. 257). Ultimately, I coded the data on the transcripts to find themes, gaps, holes, etc., that helped with my research.

“Precoding is a process of reading, questioning, and engaging with your data (e.g., transcripts, artifacts, fieldnotes)” (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 260). Precoding was a way to help me get my first impressions out about the interview, as I played it back, reread it, and transcribed it immediately. This is where I began to ask questions and more questions on whether or not I asked the right questions during the interview, got the information I needed, or what I needed to change for the future. The authors also suggest that precoding as a researcher, one should “familiarize yourself with the data, generate potential codes, see if you need to revise aspects of your design, and determine what literature you need to consult” (p. 260). This process allowed me to make my research better. I didn’t want to just read my data, but I wanted to be engaged, as the authors mentioned earlier. Engagement entailed me reading through the data several times,
pulling out themes, asking questions, looking at it with my chair, making connections with what I had, and/or seeing what I was missing.

Coding helped me reflect on what I learned, what I still need to know, and how codes relate to other codes (Ravitch and Carl, 2020). Since codes do not just appear within my research transcripts or documents, I came up with them as I actively engaged with my data. The themes I found throughout my data helped me draw conclusions and develop a way to change the problem based on what I saw.

Lastly, I used the process of validity. Ravitch & Carl (2020) writes, “Validity, in qualitative research, refers to the ways that researchers can affirm that their findings are faithful to participants’ experiences” (p. 166) and that it “demonstrates a fidelity to participants’ experiences rather than specific methods” (p. 167). Doing this reminded me to constantly relook at my data as I went through the process to see if what I saw initially while breaking it down reflected the themes I created. Ravitch and Carl (2020) write in response to my statement, “This is one reason why it is important to scrutinize themes by checking and rechecking your interpretations against your data as well as looking for alternative explanations and possible misinterpretations” (p. 285). I may have interpreted my participants differently than they intended, which is okay because, with this research, there could be several ways to interpret the collected data. Being able to go over my work shows not only my commitment to the process but also that I wanted my results to reflect what was happening and what my participants shared as their experiences. I can’t think about creating change if I don’t understand the data that was presented to me.

**Ethical Considerations**
According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “ethical considerations are especially important at different times during the research process” (p. 53). This reminded me that, like everything else in research, ethics can be challenging and an ongoing process. It just didn’t start and stop with my participants, but it carried on to the end; therefore, I had to be willing to address any issues that arose. As I think about my research, some of the primary considerations I considered were my role in the study and the relationships with my participants, my interpretation of the data, and how I put the results out. These three points could have caused issues within my study, depending on my relationships (if any) with the participants. Not only could these have caused problems, but they could have also messed with the validity of my research. This raised even more concerns when thinking about the ethical aspect of research.

Some of the main points to remember when it comes to ethics are respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice, as stated by Creswell and Poth (2018). Research has not always had a good name behind it; therefore, I must ensure my participants know and understand that I recognize them as human beings and not as research “lab rats.” Ravitch and Carl (2020) discuss this idea of I.R.B. (Institutional Review Boards). I.R.B. helps to ensure that the participants in the research study will not be harmed in any way within the study. I think of it as acting as an insurance policy on their behalf as protection. Although it may be a long process, I think it is a well-worth process when I think about its overall security for research.

When working with my participants, I ensured their safety throughout this process by creating a consent form outlining the purpose and their role and setting up the boundaries within the research. Next, I ensured that everything we discussed remained confidential and only used when I spoke to the set people approved to work with me throughout this process. Third, I made sure that pseudonyms were used for their names so that they could not be identified and/or
embarrassed when it is published due to any information that may have been offered. I also had an open-door policy for them to come and talk to me anytime throughout the process to ensure they felt comfortable. I wanted them to know that this was not just a one-way street; I was willing to give and share with them in the same way they gave and shared with me. I also wanted them to know that their ideas or suggestions were welcomed during this study on how they would like to see change because they are the ones living it. Lastly, the participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. All of this ensured that the data I released was accurate and not made up, which helped them trust me more.

**Summary**

This chapter focused on the methodology that supported my research. I explained what qualitative research is, what the narrative approach is and why I chose to use it for my study, my research questions, my participants and why I chose them, the setting of each participant, how I will conduct my research, reflexivity, and ethical considerations. I also talked about how validity fits into my research and how I plan to analyze the data received from the interviews. Overall, this chapter was the foundation of my research and how I collected the data needed to support my research questions.

**What’s Next?**

Chapter three introduced what took place in chapter four, the analysis of the data collected from my four participants through interviews. In the next chapter, I take an in-depth dive into the data I received. In addition, I found the common themes among all the interviews and discussed them.
Chapter IV
Data Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the data that I collected, how it was analyzed, and to present the findings of the data analysis. I will briefly restate my problem statement and research questions and introduce my participants in-depth as I tell their stories.

Problem Statement

At the center of this research, I explored the importance of early childhood teachers’ cultural preparation programs when it comes to working effectively with students of color. To examine this problem, I conducted narrative research and used the participants' stories as the data I explored. Exploring the following questions guided me as I analyzed the data obtained from the interviews.

Research questions

Below are the research questions. These questions guided the development of the research design that allowed me to find answers to these questions.

1.) What can we learn from early childhood educators about their preparation for working with students of color?

2.) How does a program coordinator design and implement a curriculum that helps educators support the needs of students of color?

3.) Are educators taught self-awareness that will help them be aware of their students and their cultures?

Data Collection

I collected data for this study by interviewing four participants and listening to their stories two times each. Most of the interviews took place on Zoom. They lasted anywhere from
an hour to an hour and a half so that I could fully understand who each participant was, how they felt about their preparation to teach, and how they prepare to work with novice educators. These interviews were used as a way to hear the stories of each participant and to understand their experiences from their lens. There were several themes that came up while interviewing that the participants had either the same or differing opinions on. The below interview analysis will go in-depth about each participant and their stories.

Analysis is "understanding the relationship of broad interpretive processes to specific analytic procedures—the role of subjectivity across these domains" (Ravitch and Carl, 2020, p. 237). It helped me begin to make sense of the data that I collected as I reflected on the process as I went through and reviewed everything. This process allowed me to summarize what was collected and found in the data. By analyzing the data, I was able to look for patterns, identify themes, and try to find new ideas and understanding that were collected from my participants. This happened as I thoroughly examined the data presented during the study. Analysis and interpretation were also useful as I thought about new practices or ideas to include for further implications of the study because they helped inform my decision as I thought about what needed to happen next.

Using this analysis process, I came up with six themes to discuss in the below narratives from the stories. These themes included culture, equitable practices and beliefs, politics of education, teacher preparation programs, culturally responsive teaching and working with students of color, and self-awareness/awakening.
The Stories Hardly Told

Ravitch and Carl (2020) write “narrative research “examines human lives through the lens of a narrative, honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge” (p. 27). Denzel and Lincoln explain that narratives are also verbal actions.

Whatever the particular action, when someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience and reality. When researchers treat narration as actively creative in this way, they emphasize the narrator’s voice(s). The word voice draws our attention to what the narrator communicates and how he or she communicates it as well as to the subject positions or social locations from which he or she speaks (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). (p. 657)

Narratives help us see the stories of others through their lens. In this case, the narratives will help me get my participant's experience in their teacher preparation programs and to hear how they felt their experience prepared them to work with students of color.

Scene One: Jackie

Jackie was my very first participant, and I’m glad she was. Her energy for the topic had me excited about interviewing her. From the moment we got on Zoom, we immediately clicked over the topic because she had some very honest thoughts about her program and teaching career overall. Her vibe was everything. I was able to tell that this topic meant a lot to her. I was able to hear the passion in her voice at times as we talked. The longer we talked, the more she opened up about her role and how she envisions helping educators based on her experience in her preparation program and during her first few years of teaching.

To give you more details, Jackie is a 45-year-old Black woman. She holds a B.A. in Communications, MAT in Elementary Education, and an Ed.S in Curriculum and
Instruction. Jackie has worked in the field of education for 15 years. During that time, she has served in the roles of primary classroom teacher, Assessor and Training Specialist, and Academic Coach. The interviews with Jackie often lasted about an hour and a half each because she had so many stories to tell. They felt so natural that we often forgot we were recording as we dived deep into it. Jackie not only brought her life experience into the interviews, but she also included some of her professional experience from her current job as an Academic Coach that coaches many teachers from first year to teachers that have been in the field for 30+ years. I was very impressed by much of this interview. She made me think about things I did not originally think about when writing my interview questions for my participants. Most of all, she helped me, based on our conversations, see education in a different way.

Who is Jackie?

Before starting the interview, I asked Jackie to tell me about her as a person- her upbringing, what motivates her, how she got into education,

The first thing that popped out was what motivated me to be a teacher. Honestly, it sounds so cliche, but it's my story. My mother was a teacher. So, I kind of came into the education thing. I was little, going to school with my mom, and at times, she was getting her classroom together before the beginning of the school year, and I remember being in second or third grade. Me and some of my cousins went to the same school. They're a little bit younger than me. We would come home and go to my grandmother's house. One of my cousins lived with my grandmother, and for Christmas one year, one of them got a chalkboard. I just remember I would come home and treat them like they were the kids. I was like, okay, sit down, and we would play school, and it was like okay. Over time, I
think at one point I tried to shy away from it because I was like, I don't want to do what my momma do, I want to do my own thing, you know, but it kept calling my name. Jackie continued telling me about her experience when she was first in education.

I started out as an elementary ed major when I went away to school, but life happened, and I ended up changing my major to communications. And so, I was in communications for a while, but something kept pulling me back to education. I'm like; I feel like this is what I need to do. I loved working with children, and I remember I went and took the basic skills test and the content area tests without even having a program or anything set up after I got my communications degree. I was like, yeah, I'm going to take this test, but I hadn't enrolled in anybody's program for education. So I ended up doing that, and then shortly after a couple of years, I took the basic skills, and an opportunity came to me from somebody I knew, and they were like, “Hey, what are you doing nowadays? You still want to teach?” I was like, I do, and I just took my test and was doing everything I needed to do, but I just have not gotten into a program yet. I'm trying to work out the financial part and just all of that, and they were like, “We work for the school district that’s starting a resident teacher program. If you're interested, let me know because the new cohort starts next year.” And so, I'm like, okay, whatever, I'll give you a call, and I ended up calling her, and I was able to get in on that cohort, and I was lucky that I had already taken the basic skills. And again, I don't know why I took the basic skills because I didn't have anything. It was a personal goal of mine, but it helped when it was time for me to start that program. And from there, I started teaching, and I remember I was like, okay, I want to work with the younger kids because I liked little kids.
You know what my first position was in middle school? Sixth grade and I hated it. I hated teaching sixth grade. That was not a good fit for me. And it's funny, my son is in sixth grade now (as was laughed). But it was hard. I said I don't want to do this. This lady that was a first-grade teacher at the school that I was in, I don't know what made her come to me, and she was like, “I'm thinking about moving to sixth grade. I feel like the sixth grade is more my background. And if I go to sixth grade, would you be interested in doing my first-grade class?” I always wanted to do like third grade, but I was like, oh, I'll see. Anything's better than the sixth grade. And I got into first grade, and I loved it. I taught first-grade majority of my career in the classroom for eight years, and then I taught third. I didn't end up going to third grade. But when I got switched, I thought I really wanted to teach third grade, and I realized that I had fallen in love with those first graders, so I preferred working with them even after the third graders. So, that's kind of my background and how I got into teaching.

After talking about she got into education, Jackie began talking about her current work.

I just started my job recently, towards the end of the summer, the beginning of this school year, and my formal title is an Academic Coach. And so, with that, it's instructional coaching, but there's a lot of administrative tasks that are built into the role as well. So, I spend a lot of my time working on providing professional development for the teachers as well as the administrators. I think I'm doing very well in the role. In fact, I've been told I'm doing well. And I really enjoy the job because I feel like it's giving me an opportunity. Looking at the DEI and racial part of it. I get a chance to really hone in on that because our push from the district level is really equity for our students. Equity, looking at equitable practices and equitable grading, and just making sure that we're
meeting the needs of all of the students. So, you asked about the district. Well, the makeup of where I work, the district as a whole, when I step back, and I look at everybody, so as far as administrators, including myself, it's one other, so there’s that. Let me back up and say there are four school buildings in this district, and there's two primary buildings. One is from pre-k to second grade, and then the other is from kindergarten to second grade. So, the pre-k all go to one building. Then we have one intermediate building, and then we have one junior high. And as a coach, I work across all grade levels in all of those buildings. So going back to the makeup of administrators out of those four buildings, one of the principals is black, and then myself as a coach, another black person, we have some Hispanics, and our superintendent is Hispanic. A lot of our district leadership are people of color. So, the superintendent, Assistant Superintendent of Finance, and the Director of Student Services are all people of color. And then, like my boss who is the director of innovative learning, he is a white man, but I really appreciate working with him because he's one of, I don't want to say a few people but kind of, one of a few people that actually get it, you know. I feel like his push for equity is greater than… he's really gets it. He does want to see a district that embraces everybody, what everybody brings to the table, and making sure that we meet everybody where they are.

After Jackie gave me her story, she told me about her teacher preparation program.

**Teacher Preparation Program**

Jackie completed a residency program a Chicago State University. At the time, she was working for the Bellwood school district, and they had a partnership with Chicago State. It was a cohort of 12 people who went through the programs in Elementary Education. Once she
completed the program, she ended up with a license that was for kindergarten through eighth grade. As we talked about her program, she stated,

You go through the regular teacher prep coursework; however, when it came to student teaching, we did not have an opportunity to do student teaching. It was more on-the-job experience, like a paid internship. My first experience being in the classroom was really my first year on record as a classroom teacher. So, we had support. We had a supervisor that would come and observe us in that program. Rarely did she come, but that was the way the program was set up.

Jacki continued talking about her experience of not having a mentor but having someone step in to help her.

We were just kind of thrown into the classroom instead of student teaching, where you have a mentor teacher that's showing you how to do it. The program that I was in was set up so that our supervisors come in. We didn't have a mentor through the program, but the school district was supposed to provide us a mentor, but I never got a mentor until like my third year, and by that time, I had picked up by just going to random people or people being nice enough to come. I have one friend I still keep in touch with, and she’s a professor at NIU. She would come, but she wasn't my mentor. She was just thoughtful enough to come and say, “Hey, you need some help.” And my teaching partner it was her first year, too, so it was two sixth-grade teachers that were first-year teachers. So, she would come in and just kind of show both ways. “I'm going to show y'all how to do report cards, and I know you didn’t know we got this coming up.” She would make sure she kept us in the loop. She was kind of unofficially our mentor if you even want to call it that.
We then began talking about her experience in her teacher preparation program. Jackie said,

As far as my experience with that, I would say the good is that the program gave me an opportunity to break out into the education world where at that place in my life, I don't think I would have been able to student teach. So it gave me an opportunity to get into the field of education without having to go through that process. And I felt like it was good because you still got your regular classes, but the con to that is, from what I hear from new teachers that have gone through a traditional program is kind of the same across the board. I don't feel like I was 100% prepared to go into the classroom. Well, and especially because, in my case, I was still taking classes and working and starting to work at the same time. Still, the coursework, prepared me on how to write a lesson plan or, how to think about teaching in certain content areas. Still, that actual interaction amongst the student, like you don't get classroom management, you don't get the real-life parts of teaching that I think it supersedes. But it's a portion that I feel like in the program you don't really get. But like I said, I don't think that's anything that is necessary. Well, I guess maybe if you're student teaching, you get that somewhat of an experience, but the coursework itself doesn't. I didn't feel it prepared me for getting out there and being in a classroom, and dealing with parents, and dealing with the process and the educational system as a whole as opposed to theory.

She continued to say,

And then, early in our coursework, we were like understanding American education, all of that. And then, by the time fall started when school started, we went into our classrooms. And so, like I said, on one hand, I felt like I was just thrown into the classroom, and we had a supervisor that would come and help, and although we had
coursework that went along with it, we only took like two courses a semester. And when it came to our methods classes, teaching us how to teach this specific content area, we had projects that we did, but it was, again, people from across elementary education, so with me being in first grade, the projects and the coursework we had was set up so they could work for anybody through eighth grade, you know? So, we worked on that in our courses, but then sometimes the things that were going on in the classroom was baptism by fire, because we hadn't even got to that, of course, yet. It was kind of rough, and I think my saving grace was my mother. The year that I started teaching, my mother had retired so she had a lot of time on her hands when she would come into my classroom. She helped me a lot. She was really like my mentor. Even though I think the program was supposed to set us up somewhere, we should have had a mentor in our program, and that didn't happen for me. I didn't get a mentor or anything like that until I had been working there for three years, and I was like, you are telling me stuff I already know. I was done with my program and everything, and then I got a mentor from the district. But yeah, I felt like my mom was my saving grace because even the things that were not specific to the culture of the district, she would give me a heads up on the end of the quarter and the process or procedures. It was just kind of like you could get in and sink or swim.

After we talked about Jackie’s experience in her program and how she was just thrown into the classroom, Jackie really began to explain how it was in the classroom trying to teach a course that she had not yet learned while in school. Jackie talked about the process of self-learning:

I think it was a lot of long hours because sometimes, you kind of want to use common sense, but it's kind of like you go with your gut. So, when I would get in the classroom, keep in mind, my first year was a sixth-grade class, so I'm really feeling like, oh my god,
I got to teach sixth grade, and then the sixth graders, they know when you don't know. The first graders they don't get it, but those sixth graders will know, and they will call you out on it. So, I would take my manuals home. I had to really reteach myself middle school math because I had been out of school for a long time. You know, you look at certain things, and man, I don't regularly use them every day. I got to go back and teach myself how to do it. But no real other strategies or anything. I ended up learning later these are some strategies that you can use, but I feel like that's education. A lot of stuff, even when you get the formal learning, you still got a lot of self-learning to do anyway, so I just kind of took it upon myself. I spent a lot of long days and long nights trying to figure out what I was supposed to be doing for a couple of years. Shoot.

Continuing the conversation, Jackie talked about the Teacher Leadership program she just completed last year and how they had a cultural competence course that had to be taken. However, cultural courses were not explicitly taught when getting her licensure to teach. She argued that having these types of programs is beneficial to start helping educators become reflective in their practices and helping them become aware of their biases.

As Jackie continued to be reflective on her teacher preparation program, she said nothing jumped out at her about her program teaching them how to understand students’ culture to support their learning. Jackie stated,

There's nothing that stands out or jumps out from my teacher prep program. But when I went back shortly after and got my ESL endorsement, I think that was the first time that I really had a chance to stop and think about it from a cultural perspective.

For Jackie, it had been several years before she had even had a conversation about the cultural perspective that could be at least a bit helpful. When I asked Jackie how important she thought it
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

was to talk about culture and support students’ learning in teacher preparation programs, she said,

I think it's very important because if we look at our country, I know some people like to try to continue to make white people or white ideas the dominant culture, but realistically, it's like we're so mixed up. I think it's a lot of brown people other than white, you know, whether biracial or mixed-race people, but that still means they're incorporating some brown people. So, everybody has a culture and a background, and I think it's kind of one of our hierarchy of needs when we go back to them.

Culture

I started the interview by asking Jackie to tell me about a time when she learned something about culture from her students and what it taught her.

As far as that one goes, I'm really thinking my teaching experience has been mostly working with students of color and predominantly students of color, and black students, to be specific. So, something culturally that they taught me, I can't necessarily think of anything that they taught me, but I know that there are things that we have related to when it comes to culture. But when I think about it, I have had some Hispanic students, and I taught first grade for most of my career, and I'm just thinking about a student that came and told me about a party they had, and he was just telling me, “Ms. T, we host. We have a party, and we roast the whole pig for our party.” Just kind of telling me what their tradition is for putting this party together that they had.

I then asked Jackie how she responded when the student told her about their tradition, being that it was something different from hers. She responded,
I'm used to barbecue and stuff like that when we have like a party (as she laughs). But, with him telling me that, I do remember asking him more questions like so, do you guys eat the whole part of the pig when you roast it? What other kinds of food do you eat with it? But yeah, just kind of asking him a little more questions because I was curious, you know. It is different from our culture. So just asking questions out of curiosity.

Jackie was then asked to explain her thoughts on the role of culture in education. Jackie said,

Culture is everything in the classroom, in society as a whole, you know; culture is part of all of our identities. So, it's part of who each and every one of us is. We can't, I can't relate to, or I can't see my students without having an understanding. Or even I may not understand their culture if it were a different culture than mine. But just knowing that they come with their other part of their identity. Just recognizing that everybody has something different to bring to the table and culture is part of who everyone is.

Additionally, Jackie talked about recognizing the misconceptions that people have about culture and how it can affect how we see students. This causes us to need to change our mindsets when helping students explore their identities through their culture.

That mind shift change, taking the time to get to know your students and really know your students, not just know their name, but know their parents, where they are from and who are they. That’s identity. Looking at each part of that as intersectionality. Who is this individual that I'm dealing with?

Jackie made it clear that for educators to understand the students around them and who they are working with, they must not only understand a student’s culture, but they must also have the ability to change how they see them.
In addition to the mind shift change that people need to take part in come the many misconceptions, people tend to have when it comes to culture. Jackie said, “A misconception that I think is when people allude to that just because you’re black, you automatically share the same culture as the next black person.” Jackie explains here that people often think they understand who and what the student is because they have the same skin color as their students. Culture is about getting to know your students, Jackie mentioned.

It’s imperative that you connect and meet them. And that’s why I think a lot of times the mark is missed because the kids are not going to learn from you if they don't feel like you know them or can see them for who they are.

Talking to Jackie revealed that culture is not something that people do. It’s who they are, and culture plays a significant role in how we connect with and work with students as an educator.

**Equitable Practices and Beliefs**

We then discussed equitable practices for all students and how educators can make this happen. Earlier in the interview, Jackie talked about mind shifts and how educators needed to change how they see their students to connect with them. As we dug deeper into this topic, Jackie stated, “White people have a certain mindset, and Black people have a certain mindset.” She mentioned that within these mindsets, this is where we begin to see issues regarding people in general, but it also applies to the education system. The mindsets include “societal norms or societal beliefs…oppression…. policy. We both trust and fear the system that we know could benefit some and oppress others.” In this statement, Jackie was saying that our educational system can be beneficial to some, but is not always beneficial to all, especially when considering the experiences that students of color have. As a part of this system, Jackie said, there are some
“policies and practices that we know are in place that have been put in place to hold us back as teachers.” Jackie continued to say,

We sometimes perpetuate those policies that we know are set up to oppress others, but we perpetuate it because it's like, you want to trust the education system, but you also know that it wasn't really designed for all people to prosper.

Jackie connected the above to how she sees the education system and how it pushed her to grow and reflect and not do the same things as the oppressor.

That's the part that I learned. I would say it's something I've learned and the thought of room to grow because I'm a reflector, and I'm always reflecting on myself. And when I think about that, it's like, okay, I know I’m doing things that are part of something because that's the way it's been done. And that's in terms of the education system. That's what I know to do, and that's what I experienced as a student, so I continue to do that.

But, then, in that self-reflecting, it's like, how can I do things differently? What can I do to kind of shift my mind so I can push back and say, no, that's not right? So, what is it that I can do to change that? So, I think it's a lot of room to grow, and I just enjoy learning new things and when new things come up, to look at it from a different perspective.

Jackie made it clear that the education system is really not set up to support equitable practices for all students, especially students of color. I believe she is correct when she said we want to trust the system, but we know that the system is not designed for all people, and that’s a sad thing to know. So, if educators know this, how do you think our students feel as they go through the process every day in a system that is not designed to help them succeed? We then talked
about ways that educators can make students feel more secure in their education by making meaningful experiences for them. Jackie said,

   If the mission or the goal is to meet individuals, you have to take them for their entirety, the whole. It's really important because if you understand who they are, you can affirm their beliefs, and you're not necessarily pushing your agenda on them. You find where they are, and you make sure you affirm them. They can then be more engaged, and you can make their experiences more meaningful for them based on their culture.

   In addition, Jackie also talked about how sometimes equitable practices don’t show up in the classroom because educators bring their beliefs and practices into the classroom.

   In order to understand, teachers come with a certain belief system; we all do. People have a certain belief system. And we come into the classroom with these belief systems, whether they're good beliefs, stereotypes, or positive beliefs. You may have a teacher that sees a dominant culture, and that might be what they connect to that culture. So, then they like to push that culture on other people. But thinking about where those beliefs came from the history. And then, if you look at the educational system from over the last 100 years, there have been a whole lot of changes in the system that kind of help perpetuate these ideas and kind of reinforce racist beliefs. Think back to the Industrial Age when people were factory workers. They dealt with kids and students in a way where they were preparing them to end up growing up and working in a factory. Then, you had the progressive error, where they wanted to try different things and really start to track students. Then they started with IQ testing and things that helped back up their beliefs. And then you got behaviorism, where it’s a push to conform. So, all of those are dominant beliefs, and anytime you are outside of that, it’s hard to relate to something
that’s different. So, I think teachers are like an onion. It's a lot of layers to it. Teachers and their belief systems are sometimes their own personal belief systems, and sometimes it's belief systems because of what was done to them. They develop these belief systems based on their experiences and not necessarily right or wrong, but it's true because that's the way they did it for me. The main answer is it's the teacher's belief systems that keep them from looking at people individually, and they haven't gotten there yet.

It seems that Jackie was saying that educators don’t know how to provide equitable practices because they haven’t experienced it themselves.

**Politics of Education**

While discussing equitable practices, Jackie began to speak about some things that cause educators to be unable to support students of color due to some of the challenges they experience in the classroom. One thing Jackie mentioned was that teachers have pressure to be accountable to specific standards,

I think changes in policy put pressure on them to be accountable to certain imposed standards. Even though we're looking at early childhood, but early childhood moves up to elementary, which moves up, and that pressure that teachers get to meet these standards have really taken away the creativity and the thought that you put into it is now, okay, but I got to get these standards in, and I felt this in my experience. I feel you can kind of do both, but I also feel the pressure is so great, that it does kind of go away from, “so what can I do to meet my students where they are and get them where I need them to be for them based on their focus,” to “I got to get them to get good test scores.” Once we do these tests or assessments, these are certain scores we have to make. And so yeah, I think that's a huge part of it.
Jackie also said that due to the pressure and the top-down standards of education, “I may be missing some of these students, but I got to keep my job… There’s a lack of time and accountability, and the pressure of the accountability plus the lack of time cause situations where you don't really have the time to stop and say, okay, you know what can I do? Although that's the expectation.” The school system has a chain of pressures, and Jackie talked a little about it.

I think that school districts are under so much pressure. So, while the teachers are focused on the pressure put on them, I think administrative are under the same kind of pressure, different pressure but the same kind of pressure. They are not taking the time needed to examine what needs to be done to resolve problems because they got to meet what the state says schools have to do or based on what ISBE says or whatever the case may be that you let certain things fall by the wayside that are important things.

Because districts are under pressure, they still don’t do what is best for the students. Jackie stated,

In education, we have a tendency to push a new initiative, and then it gets old, and it dies out, and we don’t let it be successful. Or the education system switches it up, and then here comes a different initiative now. But in order to see success, you have to give it a moment; you're not going to see it instantaneously. So, we have to let it play out and see how it unfolds. So, I just hope we don't let the initiatives go. We can just keep working at it and hopefully get to what we would like to see eventually.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Working with Students of Color

This part of the conversation is where I really got a chance to talk to Jackie about her experience working with students of color and how she prepared she felt to teach them. Jackie
mentioned at the beginning of the interview that she was a Black woman who worked with primarily Black students throughout her career. This is what she said,

As I mentioned earlier, most of my experience as a classroom teacher has been in predominantly black schools, and I think that because I am a black woman, I felt like I had an opportunity to relate to my students better; that connection or that engaging teaching. I could take something from our culture that I knew they understood and bring it back or present material to them in a way that I knew was relevant for them or that they could relate to. Even with my first graders, I just think about the things you see on YouTube and stuff like that. They have the teachers singing songs they hear on the radio but changing the words. I used to do stuff like that. Make up a song because I know all kids, but especially our people, we got this thing with music. You put it in a song, they can sing it, and if they can sing it, they can get it, you know. So, I would make stuff up and put it in songs that I knew they were into or take current events or things like that and just talk about it with them. Even with my first graders, depending on what the conversation was or whatever it was that we would talk about, I would try to relate whatever was going on in the world to what they were learning. I think that's how I made a difference with my kids because I got them, and they got me. They knew I got them too. They knew I understood who they were.

Jackie began to talk about her practices while working with students of color and questioned whether or not her practices met the needs of her students. She said,

In the history of education, over the years, these practices have been carried down and are still being used today. A lot of them have a lot of racial undertones, especially when you look at IQ testing or looking at behaviorism and stuff like that. And you want me to
conform because this is what you think? But that’s not how it works. I think about when I worked at a school, and this was kindergarten. I wasn't the teacher, but I was at the school, and the kindergarten teachers were older white women, predominantly black neighborhood, or student population and something that I would I see when I think about this behaviorism. When they would walk, they will have their students walk down the hall. They would make them walk in a single-file line; they had to have their hands behind their backs and their heads facing the ground to walk in line. I remember seeing that, and I was like, What the hell is this? They looked like they were a part of the chain gang, the hands behind the back, and they had to be crossed like they were in handcuffs and facing the ground. I know myself and a couple of other people brought it to the principal's attention, and the principal brought it to her attention like, “What is going on?” They got these kids, and it's all part of conforming to the bare norm of this is how you to behave going down the hallway, but you got them walking like prisoners, and they were black. And so that made even more of a gut punch because it's like, okay, we already talk about the pre-K to prison pipeline, and you're perpetuating exactly what it's set up for. Your way of making them conform and being quiet as they walk down the hall. But again, these were some older white ladies. And all in all, our students are blind, and so it's like, what's the message you're giving here? They're in kindergarten. They don't know.

Jackie reminded me that education is bigger than us when we have students that need us. She said, “to make a true difference, it has to be way greater than me, and that's how I see it.”

Jackie mentioned that even while being an Academic Coach, she sees how her teachers take this idea of culturally responsive teaching and think it is separate from what should already
be happening in the classroom. She gave the example of working with her teachers on lesson planning and supporting students of color in the classroom and how they respond.

So even with the lesson plan, I think a lot of people are still feeling like being culturally relevant and having equitable practices is something separate from what they were already doing. I hear them say, “Are we still doing that equity work?” and I ask, what do you mean? It should be a part of your practice when you're doing lesson plans. These are some things that you should be incorporating into your lesson plans. It's not on top of this; it should be in addition to what you're already doing.

The last important thing that Jackie talked about when working with students of color and knowing how to support them is,

Acceptance and being included are one of our basic needs. So, in terms of a student's perspective, to be able to have your educational experience really take into consideration who you are when you're being taught, I think it can be an invaluable experience. You gain so much more out of the experience. So, I think it is really important, and I'm glad that they started because with being self-reflective, I thought about my education when I was in kindergarten, first, and second grade. It's like, I've been in places where I've gone to school and had black teachers and black classmates, but I've been the only black kid in class as well. Like we say, representation is a lot and being able to recognize or see somebody that represents who you are, makes a lot of difference.

Self-Awareness/Awakening

The last theme that came up was about how she has become self-aware since working with students of color and the first time she experienced her awakening as an educator. Jackie mentioned that she has always been a reflective person. She went on to say,
I'm a very reflective person. I'm always reflecting on the day before or earlier in the day. What could I have done differently? How did this day go? I'm always reflecting on myself. And when I think about that, it's like I’m doing things because that's the way it's been done. And that's in terms of the education system. That's the way it's been done. That's what I know to do. That's what I experienced as a student, and I continue to do that. But then in that self-reflecting, it's like, okay, how can I do things differently? What can I do to shift my mind so I can push back and say, no, that's not right? So, what is it that I can do to change that? So, I think it's a lot of room to grow, you know? And I just enjoy it. Have learning new things, and when new things come up to look at it from a different perspective, I think you're growing in that respect. But just being reflective and just aware that, you know, there are, it's a constant growth.

In addition, Jackie said,

As I reflect on my career as a teacher, I have learned so much. Even now, I'm thinking about practices and mindsets, and thoughts that I had at one point and how they have changed over the years. There are times when I'll say, Man, when I was a classroom teacher, I used to do that. And now I look at other teachers, and I'm like, oh, we have to get them to change that practice, but I also know that was me, you know what I mean? So, I think in the reflecting process, and as I've been in the field, I feel good about the reflection that I've had over time.

Jackie then began talking about self-awareness and how it helps one recognize personal biases.

Being self-aware can help you recognize your biases and allows you to consciously think about your belief system and how your belief system may impact how you interact with
your students. A lot of times, if you're not self-aware, you have all these biases, but then you don't even think or know that you got these biases. You don't even realize how these biases are affecting the way that you're dealing with the students and not just students but your interactions with people in general. The more self-aware you are, the more you're able to recognize those biases. Then, you can ultimately think differently, but you're conscious of it.

As Jackie talked about self-awareness, she started thinking about her past students and how aware of them she had been or not have been throughout her teaching career.

I've always kind of been aware of the students that I worked with. It was always this conscious thing. I'm a person of color. I'm working with people of color. This is why I'm supposed to be here. These are my people. I'm supposed to help pull my people up. But it wasn't until later in my teaching when I had to really stop and think about if I was doing what was best for my students of color. But when you think about it systematically, unfortunately, the system is a beast, and no matter how you might want to do right or what your intentions are, well, a lot of times you end up perpetuating the same ideas. You're trying to do good in a system that was really designed to hold us back. It's not subtle, but unless you really stop and look at it from that perspective, it’s easy to perpetuate that stuff. Think about certain grading practices. Is that equitable for all students? Is it really the best course of action? Is it really a good practice to meet the student’s needs? Or am I really doing them a disservice? So, I will say that’s the part when I knew it was time for me to get out of the classroom.

When asked if she felt her program taught the importance of self-awareness and understanding of who she was and if it benefitted her work with students of color. Jackie responded, “No, I don’t
think so. I think that's something I've gained through experience and other things along my journey, but not my program specifically.”

**Reflections and Summary to Jackie**

The interview with Jackie brought up many memories as an educator and a student of color. Jackie made several points in her interview that resonated with me, mainly the idea of being a reflector and connecting with one’s students. Connections to the students are one of the most important ways that we can reach our students. Not only that, but having something in common with them is always a plus. As Jackie said, as educators, we want to make meaningful experiences for our students so that they can begin to learn. We don’t want them to feel as if they are being set up to go down the wrong path, like the example she gave that talked about those White kindergarten teachers who made students walk down the hall in a single filed line with their hands behind their backs as if they were in prison. We want students to feel as if school is a place that prepares them for their future, and having teachers who understand them and want to learn about them and their world is essential. When we don’t have teachers wanting to get to know their students, misconceptions come into play, and they start thinking negatively about the students. But, we as educators must put our biases and pride aside to ensure that students' needs are met in their educational experience.

**Scene Two: Tiff**

Tiff was the third participant I interviewed for my study. However, I added her after Jackie because they were both Black women, with some commonalities in their interviews as they talked about working with students of color.

Tiff brought a different insight and perspective to my study topic. Throughout the interview, her passion showed in many other areas as we discussed her experiences. Tiff allowed
me into her space and told me stories that helped me frame the picture of what it was like

growing up and being a teacher from her eyes. We discussed the mistakes she made at the
beginning of her teaching career and how she grew from them both as an educator and a parent.
Our first Zoom session got straight to the point, holding nothing back. Like Jackie, Tiff’s passion

for early childhood spilled out through every part of the interview, and it was definitely known
from the jump.

To give you more details, Tiff is in her 40s and is a Black woman. She holds a certificate

in coaching and mentoring, a master’s degree in education with instructional leadership, a

bachelor’s in elementary education, and a technical assistance level 5 credential. Tiff currently

works as a classroom assessor who lives in the south suburbs of Chicago but travels throughout
Chicago to visit and assess different schools. Before working as an assessor, she was an assistant
director of a lab school in downtown Chicago. The interviews with Tiff often lasted a little bit
over an hour each. The conversations between Tiff and me were honest and transparent. Tiff

opened up about her experiences as an educator and the importance of everyone being prepared
to work with students of color. Like Jackie, Tiff made me think a totally different way when I

heard her stories and experience.

Who is Tiff?

I asked Tiff to talk about her life, upbringing, family, and what makes her happy and sad.

Tiff said,

What makes me happy? What makes me sad? I’m a black woman who is passionate

about nurturing, and I think that's how I ended up falling into early childhood. I always

have been nurturing before I thought about education. I was always a compassionate

person. I think it's due to because I wanted compassion bestowed upon me growing up
going through my own personal things, dealing with parents who are divorced and
dealing with a parent who dealt with mental illness and not understanding and seeing the
episodes as a young child, feeling very scared and confused but interestingly enough,
God knows, and he always provides a space.

Tiff talked about her school being a safe place for her as a child.

My school was a safe haven. Growing up, my teachers created a space for me to be me,
and it was during a very, very hard time in my life when my parents were going through a
very ugly custody battle. My school was a sanctuary. They shielded me. I have very vivid
memories of spending time in the counselor's office because something was going on in
the hallways, and they didn’t want me to hear it. And so, it made me aware of how it
doesn't take much when you have an opportunity and how much you can do for them. So,
I think that subconsciously traveled on with me. Growing up, I did different things like
involvement in church, doing missionary work, and going and visiting orphanages. I just
loved it. I mean, I was trying to smuggle babies back (as she laughed). It was having all
of those experiences and going to college that made me want to be in service work.

She began telling me about how she got into education.

So, I originally strived high to be a doctor. Why not? You know, because it's that
generational thing. You want to be better than what your parents were, and I wanted to
get that degree because my dad never went to college. My mom took classes in
community college, but like I was going to a university. I can be the first one in my
family. Then my sister and I went to get our masters, and now, my kids see that the
master's is like the new high school degree in my house. However, I kept ending up
finding myself, even when in college, in these situations where I was still working with
kids, and in high school, I used to babysit. In college, I did all the jobs the campus had. I ended up finding a job that provided childcare while parents were going through their drug rehabilitation counseling. So I had these babies, preschoolers, and even some older siblings, and we're helping with homework. It really opened my eyes to the things that these kids are dealing with. But I always had a heart for those who were going through things. So, then I ended up switching my major.

After telling her education story, Tiff told me about her upbringing and what her life was like as a child.

I grew up in Harvey, Illinois, back when Harvey was a city that was the "it" thing. My first actual memory of my dad and my mom together was the day he left. I don't remember everything, but I remember feelings of confusion, anger, something's not right, and sadness. So, growing up in my early years, it was just my mom and one of my sisters. I have four sisters. There are five girls altogether. But during that time, it was just me and my sister, who is one year older than me. We grew up with my mom, who, at the time, we didn't understand what was happening. She would have emotional swings. She would say things that didn't make sense. She would talk to things that weren't there. She would go in and out of the hospital. When she was in the hospital, we would go and stay with my maternal grandmother. My dad had visitation rights, and we would visit him. It was supposed to be every weekend, but it wasn't always that way. My mom wasn't happy that they weren't together. And I'm not casting judgment because she has the right to her village, and I know my dad was not a perfect human being at all. But we did deal with the consequences of them not being able to talk to one another, and sometimes, we didn't see him. Then she ended up having my youngest sister, and so that made three of us together
with my mom. And then my dad, he had a daughter before he got married to my mom. And then he met my stepmom, who had a daughter before they got married. So, my dad and stepmom got married, and they had two children with them, and then we would visit sometime.

Tiff continued,

That experience growing up with my mom and what we now know is labeled as schizophrenia was very confusing and very hard. It led to me being a very timid and very quiet child; I was an extreme introvert. I loved my sister S, who was one year older than me. I wanted to be her. When people used to say, when is your birthday? I would say her birthday. And she was like, “Tiff, that's not your birthday. Why do you say that?” Although she was one year older than me growing up, she was probably about five or six years older than me because she took care of me. She helped my mom with me with her being a single mother who worked. My sister would be left alone a lot, and we took care of each other. I started doing laundry, and I don't even know how old I was.

Continuing her story, Tiff talked about the time her mother came to the school and caused an issue.

Around when I was in the sixth grade, and my sister was in the seventh grade, my mom was in and out of another hospital in Minnesota. There was an incident that happened, and it was very explosive. So it started with an incident at school where I was with some other girls who broke a toilet, and everybody that was in the bathroom got in trouble. We all had a one-day suspension until our parents came up to the school to talk to the principal, and with my mom, I was scared out of my mind. When my mom came to the
school, she was not mad at me. She was mad at the school because she accused them of allowing somebody to touch me. So, the whole story had convoluted and changed.

I was out of school for about a week, and during that time, she was beginning to go through an episode where her behaviors were very erratic, and things got really ugly to the point my sister told my dad she wanted to go live with them. I called my grandmother to tell her I was leaving and needed her to come get me. So, when she came back home from that whole thing, for some reason again, not for some reason, God's time, my mom left the house again. She said she was going to Walgreens, that was literally five blocks away from our house, which would not take long. My grandmother came with my cousin, and my sister already had bags packed for herself and for us, and she told us, “You can come with me, or you can stay here, but I'm leaving,” and this is when she was in seventh grade. And I was like, we ain't running away. My sister said, “I'm leaving,” and I was like, what? You're not leaving me. Um, if you're going, I'm going, so we left, and we took all our clothes left to go with my grandmother. And so, when my mom came home, we weren't there. I don't know if we left a note or if she called her mom and asked where my girls were. It hurts my heart the fact that she went through that, but we couldn't take it anymore. And so that began the journey of the custody battle, and while they were going for custody of us, my maternal grandparents had temporary custody of us. And so, we spent that year living with them. They took us to school, and then my dad was awarded custody. Again, my mom had my younger sister, who is not blood-related to my dad or my stepmom, but they ended up adopting her. So, they took all of us, and that's how we ended up with my dad and stepmom. Throughout my time living with my mom, she
would let my dad see us, and we would visit with him and my stepmom. She was great. I loved my stepmom.

She completed telling me her story by saying,

That's my story. I mean, I'm one kid. I'm a black woman, one out of five. I'm a daughter. I'm a wife. I'm a mom, and all those things have brought me to this point in my life. I am a caregiver. My mom, who we ran away from, now lives with me, and I care for her.

After only being raised with her up until the sixth grade and then at that point, we hadn't seriously been in each other's lives. So, it's a different dynamic. It's fun, and now we can do family events where everybody is together. My dad, stepmom, and mom can all be in the same room, talking to one another and being themselves.

Teacher Preparation Program

Tiff completed her teacher preparation program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She attended that program because she was an employee of the University, and they paid for her studies toward a degree. While in the program, although she did not know much about early childhood education, she mentioned that she had some “awesome professors.” As we continued the conversation about her program, Tiff tried to think if she had any courses that reflected culturally responsive teaching. She said, “I do not recall anything like too much culturally focused; it came out due to the population and the people that were in my classes. And we were encouraged to bring ourselves into that experience but nothing explicit.” She continued by saying,

Understanding cultures and stuff like cultural awareness, that’s what we talked about.

That kind of came as being in the classroom because we had diverse populations, but not explicitly. I don't recall that in my training and my formal education.
After noting that her program did not offer courses supporting cultural awareness and understanding, we began to dive deeper into what she thought her program lacked regarding cultural diversity. Tiff stated, “I would say even just the images. It could literally start with the basics, which is representation.” She continued saying,

So, what would have been great in class when they were talking about different theorists would have been to learn about theorists of color—the academics and practices of other cultures, specifically early childhood, that are not White European. Finding out what tribal communities are doing because they are doing something different and just by doing that shows representation alone because guess what was happening? While Vygotsky was studying kids and Maria Montessori was doing her thing, there was some Native American woman working with kids somewhere. There was some Black woman, some Black man, some Hispanic woman and man working with their children in their community, doing some powerful things, and we know nothing about their story. And it was happening, but their story is not told in higher academia, so it’s not being respected. And so, now, when we go out into the field, best practices are still in the land of White European culture. So that alone would be a great first step that I did not receive in the program, and I was questioning and wondering about that. Even when I'm doing PDs and training, I ask where I can find information about our theorists because I know we are out here doing this stuff with kids. So, where are our stories? And if a higher education institution decided to include those stories in the training of future professionals, now, what we are doing, which we don't see a lot, is we're modeling what we want the teachers to do in their classrooms. And that's the first step. It could start with introducing the current and past theories and practices of people from various cultures when talking
about different elements of play. We could also have videos since visuals are great. There are a lot of people who are visual learners, and we don't like to always cater to them, but getting those images in to see how classrooms are run would show what developmentally appropriate practice looks like in different communities.

Another thing that Tiff mentioned while talking about her program and what they lacked in helping educators work with students of color is that she did not have mentors that reflected the population of students in the program. She recalls,

It is necessary to have mentors of color, for teachers of color, and for teachers who are not of color to navigate those conversations about our children, about our culture, and about our communities. To be able to say to someone, whether they're Black, White, Asian, Indian, etc., I sometimes have biases about my own, and encouraging them to have that conversation is necessary. It helps us to dig into this stuff about the reality of it all when we approach one another and how to approach each other with sensitivity and humility. I did not have a Black professor in the early childhood program. I did not have a Black teacher. In all actuality, in the elementary program, the only Black person I had was my advisor, who went out in the field and observed me doing my fieldwork.

Tiff felt that her program lacked many essential elements when teaching educators to work with students of color. She thought it would be a good idea for preparation programs to be the starting point for incorporating culturally responsive teaching. Tiff said,

I say incorporating because it is when you start incorporating others’ voices and helping people see that you are a part of this educational history, too, like your people are a part of it. You might, actually, get more people that want to be a part of it because right now, if you are a first generation or you're an immigrant or something like that, guess what, the
teaching experience is not the dream. You're supposed to be coming here doing better, which means you need to be a doctor, a lawyer, or somebody that’s gone bring in some money, but that ‘something’ is not education. It's not education. And by incorporating others that’s the way to start to change the narrative.

Culture

Like the first interview, I started by asking Tiff to tell me a story about a time when she learned something about the concept of culture from her students and their families and what it taught her. She talked about one of her Chinese students who had a name change and decided to be called something different. Tiff said:

How you define your culture is who you know, what makes up who you are, how you operate, what you believe in, and your values. Everybody's story is different, and I do not want to bring any of my biases or even traumas with what I feel is connected to somebody else's story. Especially when I think about the name change, my subjective mind goes first to slavemasters changing enslaved names to be what they wanted them to be, i.e., to lose their identity. Other people I encounter experiences are different. So, I can't, and I don't want to assume the story but rather listen to their story.

As we continued the conversation about culture, Tiff discussed its role in society: “Cultures impact how you interact with others. It has the potential to enrich an experience when you allow it to have its place.” Tiff also said:

I think the role of culture is individual because someone's culture and how it impacts them varies on the individual. Still, I think how it ends up playing within a classroom setting is that I think about culture as kind of like seasoning. It's all of the spice that comes into your room, and some of those spices don't work well together, and some will
put a nasty taste in your mouth. But you have to learn how to develop and mature your palate to different seasonings because the individual’s culture is connected to rituals and things that are a part of their family, their religious backgrounds, and how they identify. I think all of these things and the communities they are part of help you define your culture, what makes up who you are, how you operate, what you believe in, and your values. So, when all those things come together in the classroom, and you have 20 kids, they each come with one to two, maybe even more caregivers. All of those people have different cultures that impact how they interact with one another. So, I see it can potentially enrich an experience when you allow it to have its place. You enable people to share, and you don’t necessarily repress or demean what they bring of themselves because when somebody actually shares that, they’re sharing themselves. Hence, it is actually kind of a vulnerable place.

Lastly, Tiff said she learned how to support her students’ culture through their parents. “It's my biggest cultural lesson, and the students and families changed me. I'm so glad I had that experience because it changed me as a whole human.”

Not only did Tiff talk about culture, but like Jackie, she brought up the issue of how identity is formed through culture. She said,

One’s identity is how you define yourself, and it’s kind of where your self-confidence sits. So, when my identity is robbed or created outside of me, the identity I built as a young child is now being questioned. And now, I’m starting to figure out how to build my own identity. What from the outside am I actually going to take in, and what am I going to reject? That is a struggle for a lot of people who do not fit the popular narrative of what is seen as beautiful, smart, professional, intelligent, athletic, or whatever arena
that you’re going to go into successfully. So that’s why I say it’s connected to that idea of your confidence depending on how you craft your identity, and if you’re able to one, protect it, or you have it, and it’s a strong structure. So, say, I'm black, I'm beautiful. I'm a smart woman of color, and I go out in the world, and it's like it's affirmed to me that I will continue to go out and strive for things and be like, no, I can, yes, I can do that. Why can't I? Because I believe it and say I am too. So, it elevates you, and I think that's why in our society, in American culture, it has been the narrative again as if I am a white male, you can be strong, you can be successful, you are to be this, and you go out in the world, and it is affirmed to you because that's what you see. White men are leaders. They are company owners. So, it's affirmed. So, you achieve, you try, and you don't even think that that's not possible. And so, I think that's why, even with people of color, how can we retell our stories? We were more than that. We are Black business owners, and we’re inventors. I need us to see this so you can affirm your identity and you will reach for the things that you can do.

Politics of Education

As the interview continued, we discussed how and why the field moved from child-focused to more of a standardized approach. Tiff reflected,

The reason why I think things moved from child-focused to standardized was when money started getting put behind it. So, when you're asking for money to help support and fund something, you have to be able to track where the need needs to go and how you see its growth; otherwise, you see them put more money to use. And I personally believe that when the idea of okay, we're going to fund this happened, or we're going to funnel this money towards No Child Left Behind. Well, what does that mean? How do
we track that? So, depending on what people were in a position of power towards disseminating those funds, it came to this idea of tracking. So, we have to track and prove growth.

Tiff continued by saying,

I feel like there became some leaning towards higher ed and following the tracks of SAT and ACT, those types of models, and letting that be the model for early childhood versus taking what we're seeing now. Taking the model of early childhood and actually bringing it up. Because what we don't do as humans is model how you work with a baby the way you work with an adult because you know they're going to be an adult. You don't treat a baby like an adult. You don’t put a baby in a suit with some hard-soled shoes because you want them to be a little professional.

Instead of looking at what we already knew to work to guide us in teaching children, we leaned on the wrong part of academia, and academia allowed, “This is how we have been ranking.” We rank understanding to get into schools as we do with the ACT to test student competency, so maybe we can model some of that. Okay, what does that look like for children? Okay, so let’s create the standards. And so, the standards kept getting evolved, and the more they incorporated people that were in early childhood or human development, you started seeing it crafted and changed. The language actually starts to sound more like how it should be. However, we’re still practicing what we experience versus what we know. So, everyone is still practicing that the information comes from the outside versus letting me pull from you and facilitate a learning experience that became harder to quantify. It takes more effort to get that data. It takes more time to get that information, and I don’t got the time.
Overall, Tiff concluded that we steered away from the child-focused approach because it takes too much time to focus on the development and needs of individual students. Essentially, when money got involved with the school system, things began to change to appease the funders rather than the focus and development of the students.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching and Working with Students of Color**

Tiff and I moved on to talking about culturally responsive teaching and working with students of color. I asked Tiff to tell me about a time her students changed the way she taught or the experiences she gave them in the classroom. Tiff said,

_The first lesson I learned is that my past affects my present. During my first year of teaching, I had this little girl named Labria; I loved her. She was the one that stuck to me, and her parents were going through a divorce. And it was one naptime when she was on her cot, and she was having a hard time acting up, acting out, being wild, and flipping all over the place. I was trying to calm her down, and she knocked my glasses off my face. And I was like, breathe because this is not your child. I was so upset. And then I looked at her, and when I looked at her, I saw a little me, and I almost went into tears because I understood her pain. I understood her frustration. I understood what she might have been going through, but I didn't because she's not me, and I'm not her. That was the beginning of me recognizing that I need to pay attention to the children. I need to learn about what they're going through. But what I cannot do is project my hurt and my past traumas into their current sadness and situation. And I will never forget it because that moment was like a huge, huge, ‘aha’ moment for me because she was a little Black girl going through hard and painful parent issues at preschool age, and I did too. I remember talking with her mom, and I was pretty close with her. Her mom and I could talk and have some severe_
kinds of conversations, and I could talk to her dad too because I started to see myself as like I'm not playing sides, but I'm going to be her advocate because at the center of this, don’t be using this baby as a pawn. If I could let them know that while y'all are working this stuff out, she's working out some stuff, but she can be okay. She can be okay too. I just remember that was my first lesson and then from there.

She then told of another lesson she learned when working with her students.

Then I learned about tone. That was my second lesson. I learned a lot of lessons in my first year of teaching. I learned that the tone I used was influenced by my upbringing and my culture. The way I perceived what I perceived is not the way everybody else will perceive it because of their different upbringing in their culture. And so I had to learn how to mitigate that, navigate it, change it up, and sometimes keep it the same. So, that was something I learned, and that was something my director pointed out. She was like your tone, think about it, and I had to think about it. I'm like, What's that all about? And I began the journey of reflecting on what's that all about when I do stuff. Why am I doing it?

The last lesson she learned, she said,

I'm going to say the third and last lesson because I learned something literally every year. Every year my students taught me something about myself, my practice, and what I might have been in the past. I went through as a teacher. I went from being a single woman, I got married as a teacher, I had my first kid, and I evolved as a human; my students were all a part of that. My class was a part of those transitions for me. But the third thing is that I can say sorry. I can apologize. It's okay to apologize to children. And you can always take back a no. And the reason why I say you can always take back a no is I learned that,
as a teacher, I was quick to say no. I would say no about everything. And the reason why I was quick to say no is that I grew up in a household where my dad always said no. And I realized that I was doing that. And I remember the first time a kid said, ‘Why?’ and I was like, out loud, that was a good question. Why did I say no? And I said it out loud to them. And I thought about it. And I was like; I think it's because I'm worried, and it opened up a conversation, like a candid conversation with the child about what concerned me about the situation. And why I said no, and then I retracted and said, you know what, I'm not going to worry about that, or we could do this and taking in their feedback and changing the ‘no’ into a ‘yes.’ But I will say, I'm still faster at saying no’s because it's still easier to take back a no than to take back a yes. So, I start it out with a no and then retract it and say, hold up, maybe it's not a no. Let me think; let’s talk about it.

We then discussed the importance of including culturally responsive teaching in the curriculum and coursework of teacher preparation programs. Tiff responded,

Incorporating CRT is essential because it could mitigate a huge debate about things… If we just normalize the actual thing that we talked about, you know, the United States being a melting pot, and we truly normalize that, and by normalizing, I mean that you give a voice to all the ingredients in that melting pot. It will allow more people to see themselves in a field they hadn’t seen themselves until now. Again, it comes back to the representation because when you can see yourself, you should see the value of it. You can appreciate the matter differently and recognize that you can add to the general value.

I then asked Tiff how she incorporated supporting her students when dealing with violence in the community, their families, and their parents. I wanted to know how she included their voices in her classroom and encouraged them. Tiff said, “Being very intentional about
books, and then also very intentional about how I presented myself and showed love to myself and my natural state.” In addition to being intentional about books and how she presented herself to her class, like Jackie, she also mentioned using music when working with students of color, “Music was everything to me. I loved introducing my kids to hip hop, clean hip hop.”

When ending this section by talking about supporting students of color in the classroom, I asked Tiff if she had any final thoughts regarding working with students of color. Her final words were, “Work with students of color by celebrating students of color,” which I thought was a beautiful way to end that segment.

**Self-Awareness/Awakening**

In this last segment of the interview, we talked about becoming self-aware and when she awakened to being culturally responsive. The first question I asked Tiff was what she learned from her students and families and where she has room to grow. Tiff responded, “I have room to grow. I mean, until I’m dead, I need to be growing. If I’m not growing, I’m dead.”

I've learned how to respect different family makeup. I will say being a teacher was my first time ever really having to have and build a relationship with same-sex couples and learning how to be sensitive, open, and respectful of that. Also, actually what was even harder was navigating, again, personal and trauma, separate parents and parents trying to figure out what co-parenting looks like. Dealing with those who are going through a messy divorce and those who say we have to have two separate conferences and give out double everything because we don't even look at each other. And so, learning how to navigate that in a way that was respectful of the place that people were in on their own journeys. So how to really see people in their current space, and how to respect that but also push forward with them. And that’s an area where I’m still growing. Because people
are people and nobody is the same. So even though I can bring in my past experience, you're not that person. The same thing Labria taught me: first, you’re a teacher, you're not that person, and that was something that I continue to do even though you’re triggering me, but you know what? That doesn’t have anything to do with you. I got triggered by a situation; you did not trigger me. So, I can't put the onus on you on something that I'm experiencing, and you have no idea. You don't know anything about that past. You know nothing about that experience. So, working through that and understanding that it’s literally ongoing, as long as we live, we have experiences that add to our Rolodex of situations that we try to assimilate and accommodate new information and experience, too, and I need to still at the same time be aware of biases that are formed. I would love for anti-bias education and understanding because it’s a thing that doesn't go away. It doesn't go away even when you know more. You can acquire more biases and things somehow, so keep working through that stuff.

She also talked about the things that she would say to students’ parents before she became one and how she realized that the things she said to her parents were unacceptable, “Before I was a parent, the things that I was saying to parents, I could kick myself. Oh wow. Because you know what, it’s not easy.”

As we discussed self-awareness, Tiff said, “Self-awareness is everything. The first time I came across an article about mindfulness, it grabbed me. It helped me come up with the words, a process, and develop a process for how I reflect.” She continued by saying,

I've always been reflective. It began out of worry that I was going to develop habits that I did not want to. I told you in the past about my upbringing, having a parent with mental illness, and hearing things. So, I was always on alert, like, how do I know if something
became a habit of mine? So, I always checked myself again and feared that I would become something that I did not want to become, or I wouldn’t be aware that I was becoming something, and I would reject it when people tried to tell me or help me. So, my personal life came into my professional. We have to be self-aware. We got to have a discerning spirit. And in order to do that, you got to be transparent. You got to be real with yourself. You got to know where your weaknesses are if you want to strengthen them, and it’s not going to feel good all the time.

She then began talking about her first teaching job, where she had supervisions that helped her to be reflective and self-aware:

At my first teaching job, we had supervisions that were very transparent conversations. And it was kind of like awakening and then reawakening, and it kept happening in levels. Every experience and exposure took me to a new level. And then I had another ‘aha’ moment. Oh, I need to do this, or oh, I should adjust. There is always more than what I perceived it to be. But yeah, and just the power of asking the question and then being quiet.

Lastly, when Tiff was asked if her program taught them elements of how to become more self-aware in her program in preparation for the field, Tiff commented,

We had to journal weekly and turn it in. We had to come back and talk about the things we did. So, in general, when it came to teaching practice, yes. Just thinking about your teaching practice and your understanding, there was always this level of reflection. But to think about your life, who you are, and how that impacts your teaching practice, not so much. I did have the opportunity to be a part of that conversation with a cohort at UIC last year. And I saw that the value of it. Yeah, we need to be having these conversations
because you bring who you are into the classroom. So, you do need to start thinking about who you are and where you are right now and that journey because whether you like it or not, good, bad, ugly, and everything in between, it comes to the classroom.

**Reflections and Summary to Tiff**

Tiff’s interview was full of passion and love for the field and her students. Tiff was very aware that her program did not provide her with the essentials she needed to successfully work with students of color. Although Tiff was a teacher of color working with students of color, she often realized that she did not always have what she needed to be a successful teacher for the population due to her own biases. She was honest about having to check her biases several times and be a constant reflector so she would not put her experiences on her students. Tiff talked about the importance of preparation programs helping educators be culturally responsive to their students because it is needed. Tiff made it clear that just because you are a person of color does not always mean you have what it takes to work with these students. Every student is different and comes with a different culture that you have to take the time to get to know. Tiff’s interview was enlightening in how she thought about how her program could have increased awareness and how it ultimately starts with representation in professors, theorists, and materials.

**Scene Three: Lisa**

Although I enjoyed interviewing all my participants, Lisa’s interview was one of the best. I say this because Lisa is a White woman who started her career working with students of color. From the start of the interview, she was very transparent about knowing she was not prepared to work with students of color and the many lessons she learned from them. Lisa laughed the whole interview as she recalled her experiences and how she was not prepared at all to be in the position to work with students of color.
To give you more detail about Lisa, she is a 28-year-old White woman. She holds a bachelor of science from Washington University in St. Louis and a master’s degree in early childhood education from Dominican University. She participated in Teach for America in Illinois as it was a requirement for her teacher preparation program. For the past several years, she has held a few different roles in the early childhood field, from a Support Monitoring Advisor, an Assessor and Training Specialist, and a preschool teacher. The interviews with Lisa lasted about an hour each. We met two different times; both times, Lisa’s stories exuded the truth of her experiences as a White woman. Lisa was not shy to talk about her mistakes, the areas where she struggled, and the advantage she had by having a Black woman co-teacher to help support her in the classroom.

**Who is Lisa?**

I started the interview by asking Lisa to tell me about herself, what she’s passionate about, what motivates her, what makes her happy, what bothers her, what she cares about, and what worries her. I wanted her to reflect on what made her want to become a teacher and what motivated her to get into early childhood education. Lisa started by telling me about what makes her happy and inspires her daily. Lisa talked about having a balance between her personal and professional life keeps her going.

What makes me happy and motivates me, I think, this was part of being a teacher. You're always front-facing and working with people all day. I will say a balance of having those meaningful interactions and also a balance of having “me” time. Having time with my dog and time to myself. I think that is what motivates me daily is having a balance of these kinds of interactions. I always love talking to you and love this, but neither one of
us is driven by having these interactions all day, every day. So, balance is what keeps me going.

Lisa continued telling me about the things that bothered her. She talked about the overall organizational structure, in which she considers the big picture when others don’t care about others.

I think what makes me mad is people, places, and structures that aren't responsive to the people they are working with the big picture; that's my pet peeve. And I think close-mindedness, overall, is a big thing and a big pet peeve. I mean, you can see that just with people you talk to daily. And I also think, just in general, when we're thinking about education, there's a lot of potentially closed-mindedness on large structures and policy.

But also, you can work with folks who have been in this field for many years and are still very open-minded and want to have that mission focus and strive to use best practices and meet kids and families where they are. And they're still people in this field who have a little bit more of a traditional, close-minded outlook. I think when we talk about how education has changed, there are many recent changes that focus on introducing more culturally responsive teaching. And so, if you have that close-mindedness, like in general closed-mindedness, it just irks me.

Lisa then told me about her upbringing and what it was like for her in her family and at school.

I am the oldest of two kids in my family. I grew up with my younger brother, who was two years younger, and then with both my mom and dad. I was born in the city of Chicago. We moved to a suburb of Chicago, Wheaton, Illinois when I was three. I would say that, especially up until high school, I grew up in a pretty homogeneous environment, especially regarding race and socioeconomic status. Culture-wise, I grew up Catholic,
and it was a large Christian and Catholic town. So, that was also like every single kind of structure where you're thinking about religion, race, socioeconomic status, and I fit in with the majority in those areas. So, I didn't really ever feel like I didn't belong there. The only times I really didn't feel like I belonged was primarily until high school. This is when I think you're figuring yourself out a little bit more. When I was growing up, I think it had something to do with being in a white-dominated school. They don't really focus on the different elements of culture or diversity as much as they should. I think even in the current day, they don't. But I think the only times I felt like I didn't belong was probably with my parents’ political affiliation, especially in elementary and middle school, where we grew up in a pretty conservative environment. My parents are pretty liberal, or at least on the political spectrum with how they vote and some ideals there and to the point where that was known among school people. So, there was some element of bullying based on other kids’ parents, knowing how my parents’ viewed things. I mean, kids can find a way to bully anyone for just about everything. So even small differences like that. I guess it's large but a small difference when you think about how I really represented a lot of other kids and fit in with a lot of the dominant culture there. And then the only other thing too was my weight, especially being a woman. It was an area where I didn't feel like I belonged. I was always like the heavier kid in school growing up. And so, I mean, when you just think about media and everything there, it definitely didn’t make me feel like I belonged. Those are two big things I could think of.

I then asked Lisa to tell me more about her schooling experience from a child up until she went to college.
So, I did go to preschool growing up. I did not do any infant or toddler programs. My mom was a stay-at-home mom for the most part while I was growing up. I had her as my primary educator, mainly while my dad was at work, especially in those early years, and then went to pre–k. I remember bits and pieces of pre-k. I remember the dramatic play center because that's the place to be in the classroom and maybe blocks. Then I remembered that my teacher's name was Miss L. I remember that we had the same name. I felt she was the really nice one in the classroom too. I remember I wanted to be just like Miss L. But that's all I really remember. And I think I remember the playground. So yeah, all the important things. But I went to elementary, kindergarten through fifth grade, in Wheaton when we moved. We moved right when I was starting pre-k, too, from the city. So, I went to pre-k right when we moved to the suburbs. Middle school was a combination of three elementary schools, and it was sixth through eighth. And then, my high school was a combination of several Middle Schools and a combination of two towns. So, it was Wheaton/Warrenville South. After high school, I applied and got into Washington University in St. Louis. That's where I did my undergrad. And then, I double majored in psychology with a concentration in child psych and educational studies and minored in Spanish. I really wish I had kept the Spanish up more. I did not prioritize as much as I should have, and I'm really regretting it in my daily experiences, both personal and professional.

Lisa then talked about her relationships with others throughout her school experiences.

All throughout these experiences, I would say my relationships with peers and teachers, especially teachers, were based on praise. I really wanted it, and I think growing up to, general praise was my love language. I just wanted to be praised by everyone and every
teacher, so I really valued school for that purpose. I wanted to do well because I wanted to make my parents and teachers happy and be a good student to please others. So, I think college is my first experience where you're kind of figuring yourself out. Education should be this tool to help me figure out myself and my future, what I'm bringing to society, and my interactions with others. And I think that’s the first time where I actually experienced a sense of forming an identity and independence. And so, college was a big step for me because I grew up pretty sheltered, and sheltered is such a bad word. But yeah, it was sheltered. I can't think of another word that accurately describes it. I don't think I had a lot of exposure to other perspectives and other cultures as I should’ve. So, leaving the Chicagoland and outskirts suburbs for college was a really good experience. It would have been nice if it had happened earlier. I mean, you do what you can with what you know and how you grow up. So, my interactions with peers growing up were fairly studious, and I didn't always prioritize relationships with friends, especially in high school. I was so driven by going the path that my parents wanted me to go educationally and pleasing teachers; that was mainly my focus. In my junior and senior years, I valued a little bit more of those interactions and socialized a lot more. But college also was a big time for that as well where, while I'm figuring out who I am, I am also figuring out what I value in friends and those I keep around me. And then, after college, I did Teach for America. Then through that program, at least the one I was in for teacher preparation, the state of Illinois requires you to get your master's in whatever you are teaching in for that subject matter while you are doing your alternative licensure programs. So, I did my Master's in early childhood education, and I did night classes while I was teaching at Teach for America, and I felt the level of pressure and exhaustion that came with being in
the classroom. Like you were a very, very important figure for the kids and their families, and then just the feeling of not having enough time to do anything, let alone taking night classes. There were definitely times when the days were blurry just because there were pressures to do everything well, but then you didn't feel like you were doing anything well because there were too many things to get done. I got my master's from Dominican University while I was doing that, and luckily, I had a great advisor and teacher that was mainly my educator throughout my master's program who was very responsive to what we were doing, what we needed, and what we actually needed to talk about while in school. So that was a saving grace.

I asked Lisa if, even though she was unsure if she wanted to teach, she still had to complete her master’s degree since she was in that alternative teaching program. She responded,

Yeah. So, Teach for America; the region I was in was Chicago and Northwest Indiana. Indiana had different educational policies, and I don’t know if that’s still the case. Indiana only required you to do one year of your master's, and then you didn't have to actually go through with your master’s studies. You just have to take the classes. And then, you didn't have to attend classes during your second year. They had a day-long Saturday class every week or every other week. And after a week of teaching, say what you want about night classes, but taking one of the weekend days. It's tough, especially when you're trying to unwind from the week. I mean, I don't have to tell anyone the importance of weekends. But Illinois required you to do it both years.

Lisa continued by telling me how she became a teacher in early childhood education.

I think I had kind of a different route than others. I did not know I was going to be a teacher. I went to school trying to focus on child psychology, which, as we know, is not
that different than early childhood. I did an educational studies, a double major focusing more on policy and educational history. I think I did like a semester of very light student teaching in a third-grade classroom and then chose to do Teach for America. I also was kind of the unique core member because while Teach for America does have some diversity racially, it does not have a lot of diversity in terms of getting experienced teachers, or it doesn't have a lot of variety in age. At the end of the day, it does get a lot of primarily affluent White kids out of college that don't necessarily stay in the education field. I knew that was not what I wanted to be, but I thought I was a little different for some reason. I think, you know, there's some accuracy there, but overall, I did still fit into that mold. In my Ed double major, I did know the problems with Teach for America. But again, the young, naive 22-year-old thought I could be different. I didn't really focus on systems, society, and the larger White supremacist culture. So yeah, that's the long story short. I went in and got really excited because I was placed in early childhood, so I didn't really pick the field. It was more assigned. But I was really excited about early childhood because, from what I knew, it represented an opportunity to go in and focus on instruction in general, but like nontraditional elements of education that we think of. Play-based learning was, and in many ways, still is, radical education for many people. I mean, not as much in early childhood because there is more evidence on best practices and really pushing that curriculum and other ways. But I do think I learned more about early childhood as I was going through teacher prep. I think teacher prep does represent the future of education if we have more of a voice in it. But that is kind of like my route to becoming a teacher. Coming in, I really valued, first and foremost, social-emotional learning and development because of the child psych background I have. And then also
partnerships with kids and their families because, again, having my child psych
background gave me a kind of different focus coming in, where I definitely had to catch
up with everything else that came into what it meant to be an early childhood educator.

Teacher Preparation Program

Since Lisa started telling me about her schooling experience and how she became a
teacher, I asked her to give me a more in-depth look at her teacher preparation program. I wanted
to know if she felt supported going through the program and if her coursework reflected
culturally responsive teaching or self-awareness.

So, again, I was placed in early childhood. I was very excited about it. Coming in, we had
day-long classes every day, and at first, it was just classed with a cohort. So, part of
Teach for America is that you're in a larger cohort with different focus areas. I was with
the Early Childhood folks. The program was mainly preschool focused and had some
kindergarten elements. We had day-long trainings and classes with mainly Teach For
America staff members at first for like the first two weeks. We had classes on culturally
responsive teaching and the attempts to learn and practice that in the classroom. And I
say attempts purposefully because I do think that when you lack an adequate amount of
teacher prep, that culturally responsive teaching is not always going to be front and
center. I didn’t have the foundation of knowing how to really teach my kids day-to-day,
nor infuse that culturally responsive teaching and everything that was included in that.
And I think it just takes more time than two months. I had a complicated perspective of
coming out of the program when I was teaching. I mean, if there was an easy fix for
education and teacher turnover and all of the issues that early childhood faces, somebody
would do it. I will say while I have a complicated, somewhat negative view of Teach for
America and how they prepare teachers and support teachers in classrooms, it's definitely a biased perspective going through it. It's a one-sided perspective, where there are many different views. From what I remember, I will say there were educational philosophy classes combined with specific early childhood preparation classes. These classes showed us what small group and whole group activities looked like and how you would teach the lessons. We did do a class during the summer that was counted for the master's program, and that was part of the teacher prep, and then we had teaching teams that would go in and do summer school teaching with the staff in pre-k classrooms. We would do half days there and then do classes after. We would then go to a different site to do some more classes and debriefs of how those teaching days went. I was lucky in that the school I was placed in one of the summer placement schools, so I actually taught in my classroom with two others, and the co-teacher that I was with became my co-teacher during that year. She was my angel. She was everything, and when I talked about teacher prep and the support there, she was it. It wasn't really Teach For America. Out of the goodness of her heart, she took her third TFA corps member and taught me everything I knew in that classroom. And I say goodness of her heart for a reason because it was not the pay and it was not the respect or anything there. It was purely because she was a good person; she was largely the support.

Lisa began talking about the mentor she received in her first year with Teach for America and the support, or lack thereof, of having a mentor.

In my first year, we had a mentor in TFA; I really enjoyed mine. She was a great person. She would try to infuse what we learned that summer in the classroom and what we actually retained from that summer in classes into my practice when we would meet. In
every conversation, she tried to talk about how I was infusing things that were meaningful, culturally meaningful to my children and my families. Our debriefs were about how lessons went and making sure that the children and families were always the focus. So, support in the first year was great. Support from my co-teacher remained in the second year, but the support from Teach For America fell off because there was a big layoff between my first and second years. So, I had somebody who taught fifth grade come in and observe me for teacher observations, which we all know how that would go. It was, “Oh, your kids are really cute, like great read-aloud.” And that wasn’t helping me. Having a longer and more adequate teacher prep like we traditionally see is actually really valuable, and I think that it would have been essential to have that second year along with having a mentor. A lot of the primary grades and above had people who reflected with them on what they were teaching, but there was not a single early childhood person that was kept on staff that came in to do any observations. So, that’s where my master’s advisor really came into play. I got very lucky with her, an amazing person and teacher. She always puts kids and families first in our conversations and the way that she teaches. I had somebody come in a couple of times to observe me in my second year, so that really helped too. But yeah, the support looked kind of wonky between the first year and the second year.

As the interview continued, I asked Lisa if she felt that her program prepared her to work with students of color and to explain. Lisa said,

No, I do think Teach for America, especially at that time and before, made more of an effort than some teacher prep programs to try to include critical race theory and just more general culturally responsive teaching practices. A lot of things I learned as I went, and
there was a lot of learning I still had to do after I left the classroom. So, I think even though they have this fast-forward element in teacher prep of “this is how to meet your kid’s needs,” and also, this is how you teach in a classroom, if you don’t have adequate teacher prep, you don’t truly understand what you should be doing in the classroom. You're not actually going to be able to really put that into practice because when we're talking about pressure, if I don't have a good enough foundation in my teaching practice, I'm not going to retain, especially as a white woman teaching almost all black children. My exhaustion is always going to go back to my dominant culture and my way of teaching, which is what I grew up with, versus what I know I should be doing from that teacher prep. And so, I think that was a lot of the case for people. You can have those classes, but none of us had that foundation to actually make sure that was being done every day.

I then asked her where she felt her program excelled when preparing her to work with students of color.

I think it's hard because if you're talking about Teach for America and this was the only way forward, then they did what they could. But I think the whole problem is that it shouldn't really be an organization. And if it is, it should really be for experienced teachers. I think it's good to have a variety of perspectives and folks in classrooms. Still, a lot of times in the communities I was teaching in, a lot of teachers looked like me and were around my age, that were in lead teaching roles. Then, there were a lot of co-teachers or assistant teachers that looked like the Black communities they were in and were older women. So, the problems just start there. Also, just my kids seeing that dynamic of White lead teachers and Black co-teachers in the classroom. They saw that
dynamic of me being referred to more, and that’s problematic in itself. And so, it's hard to think about how they could have prepared me more because there are problems with the whole concept of it. I do think what they could have done more is tried to really focus recruiting on teachers already in classrooms. There are some teachers who have been in this field, especially in early childhood, for their entire careers. I think it would benefit Teach for America and programs like that to come in and recruit teachers who want some professional development to learn newer practices that fit their kid’s needs. I talked with a lot of people that were like, “Oh, I wish I could have done that, or I didn't even know that was a thing.” As stated, Teach For America recruits mainly White, affluent, right out of college kids. I don't know if they could have better prepared me. One thing they could have done was just had a longer time. But it was an inherent problem in who they were recruiting, in which, I'm part of that problem. So, I can't disassociate from the problem. And you could look like me but have more experience in the classroom and be a good fit. But I think that when you have the majority of people who don't look like your students, you have a huge problem and who aren't also meeting their needs in the classroom.

We then discussed whether her program taught the importance of self-awareness and understanding who she was and how that benefitted her work with students of color.

I think they tried. Again, it touches on the fact that I don't think there was adequate teacher preparation in general. Even though you're trying to give me the tools to go on this self-awareness journey and be more intentional about it, it does fall to the wayside a little bit when we're actually in the classroom. Not to mention, when I don't know how to do paperwork and the screenings for the kids, which is very essential at the beginning of the year. I think not being adequately prepared for that didn't help with trying to be self-
aware in some instances. I think they did a good job with what I had, but it was kind of complicated. Again, they tried to go over culturally responsive practice and self-awareness, but I do think that I lacked that foundational prep in teaching.

She continued to say,

I'll put the disclaimer out there. It has been a few years, so I might be misremembering because my memory can be flawed. But I would say that I don't think they adequately prepared folks to go in classrooms or to implement children’s cultures and represent their backgrounds into their teaching practices. I think it was more siloed into this lesson of how you could meet a kid where they were at and have their culture represented in those ways. But it really is supposed to be throughout the entire day, and the way that you speak with students and how your classroom looks and is represented. I think there was an effort there, but again, I don't think they totally made it.

Ending the conversation about her teacher preparation program, I asked Lisa what she wished she had learned in her programs to prepare her for working with students of color.

I think more emphasis on the uniqueness of the school-family partnership in early childhood would have been really essential. Being culturally responsive includes working with families in a respectful way. As someone who didn't know what they were doing in the classroom, I sometimes felt some pretty heavy shame about not being an adequate enough teacher for my kids and families. Even beyond that, I looked different than my students. I think it would have been really beneficial to talk about how we are present in our kiddos’ education outside of the classroom. So, one of my biggest regrets is not being as involved as I should have been in the community that I was teaching in. I just really wish I had been more intentional about joining more community events. Whether I was
more religious and practicing and maybe joining a church nearby, I think it would have been really helpful and nice. I was in the community enough doing home visits, so I don't think it would have been that difficult to join in the community. I was fairly accepted by my families to be able to join in on different public community events. So, that was a big regret. I think teacher prep programs, especially early childhood, should emphasize that. You should be involved in some kind of way. I know you're not getting paid for it, but if you're really trying to meet your kids where they're at and have that impact on them, I think it's really beneficial.

Culture

I asked Lisa to tell me a story about a culture that reflects what she learned from her students and their families and the insights she gained from it. Lisa told me about a story she learned early on in her career,

I think something that I learned very early on is always talked about, but the importance of being intentional with pictures. The little things I would bring in sometimes, like books I read growing up, with characters that looked like me, little white girls. And the reaction I got was different than if I read books with characters that looked like my students. I think 99% of my students, for the two years, were all black, three to five years old. And so, when I would read those books that had White characters, I think that taught me a lot. Not just on an individual level from a student’s perspective, but me helping students see their race represented in the classroom through characters that actually looked like them. This makes learning more meaningful for them, as opposed to what was meaningful to me growing up. I think that was a big, big lesson within the first two weeks of teaching. Growing up, I read books where I saw myself in it. Books with Black characters were
meaningful to them because they could see themselves. Having the combination of all of those experiences is important. It seems so apparent talking about it. It's also way more obvious to folks who have dealt with this working with students of color in their lives. But as a White female educator coming in with a very limited extensive teacher prep, it was definitely a very quick and humbling lesson.

I then asked Lisa to explain, based on her experience in teaching, her perspective on the role of culture in education. Lisa responded,

I think the role of culture in the classroom impacts how kids genuinely learn. That's how I viewed it very quickly from having those kinds of experiences (see above paragraph). When we learn, we learn things that are meaningful to us. And we also learn when we feel valued and accepted. And so I think classroom culture should reflect what your kids and their families bring in. I started doing it at the beginning of the year by bringing in different cultural representations in the classroom, trying to make it diverse. Still, at the end of the day, it is important to have different cultures represented. I also needed to ensure that my kids, their families, and their different cultures and nuances in there were seen a lot more in the classroom. Especially when you're working with young black kids who aren't usually represented traditionally in different early childhood programs, content, and curriculum. That was really important. I think that the culture in the early childhood classroom is so influential, too, because it really creates and influences the rest of their learning experiences.

Lisa continued talking about culture and identity by saying,

Making sure that we're representing culture and influencing kids, and helping them figure out who they are in their identity in different parts of their culture. For example, doing a
food experience in the classroom. I brought in different fruits that I wanted kids to learn about, which I think that's important. And that's what I did a lot. I also brought in a family culinary experience that might be different, but it represented a child in my classroom, what they ate at home, or what was really important to their family and their cultural experiences. Doing this not only helped to start forming the children’s identity of themselves but also how they felt and viewed themselves. It made kids feel so valued in the classroom because you know that there's less of a separation between school, life, and your sense of identity. I think this is something that early childhood does really well with, trying to bridge family and school differences but also building that partnership between them.

Lisa continued the conversation by talking about myth assumptions and misconceptions.

I think the biggest misconception is that intersectionality is not ever really acknowledged enough. When we think of culture, especially for kids of color, we're just focusing on race. And just focusing on race or one aspect of culture isn’t adequate. Intersectionality is so important because it defines more of what a person brings to the table every day, their experiences, what shapes them, and how others interact with them.

Lisa continued,

So, when we talk about culture, I can easily focus on race when it's a lot bigger than that. I think that's one of the bigger misconceptions that I also continue to sometimes inherently have. But I have to try to ask why I am thinking this way. Or why is it this way? Those kinds of questions. Also, when we have these conversations about teaching kids of color, I can sometimes focus too much on the problems that I brought to the table. While there were problems, I’m not focusing enough on the beauty and positivity of
respecting those kids’ culture and what they brought with them, whether it's race, family traditions, or just other general parts of their background. I have done it in this conversation, and a lot of people focus on the problems with not meeting kids where they're at. It diminishes culture and the beauty that each of these intersections of our identity brings because we focus a lot on the challenges that come with it, like not being a part of dominant white supremacy culture. So, focusing on the beauty of our differences is important too, and a lot of times, I don't do that.

Lisa concluded this section by saying,

I did not feel like I had a racial identity coming in, and I was really ashamed to even talk about it or acknowledge it. How am I supposed to even acknowledge my children's race or their background and everything that comes with it and all the beauty in that if I can't even acknowledge that I am a White woman that's in their classroom? That's super problematic.

**Politics of Education**

While talking about her story, Lisa briefly brought up a few things that she feels education struggles with when it comes to money, meeting deadlines, and the different pressures of policies that educators have. Lisa explained,

We just aren't putting enough money into the correct areas of early childhood; even though we say it's a bipartisan issue, the money doesn't always follow. And so, I think, when you're under those constraints of having a million things to do in a day, like paperwork, being behind on the screenings of the kids, and checkpoints are due, you can’t really focus on individualized instruction, which isn’t meaningful for the kids.
Meaningful learning incorporates culture in every way and can be left behind when you feel like you are just overwhelmed in different places.

As we began talking about a child-focused environment and why things have changed if research shows that it works, Lisa agreed by saying, “Why do we keep getting to rote instruction when we know play-based learning works? But then the pressure of policy and money come into play.” Lisa made it very clear that a lot of what we are seeing and experiencing in education is due to the money and the policy pressures that educators face.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching and Working with Students of Color**

We then shifted the conversation to discuss her ability to work with students of color and her thoughts on culturally responsive teaching. I asked Lisa to tell me about a time her students changed the way she taught or the experiences she gave them in the classroom.

So, I think when I came in, even though we had had teacher prep that said otherwise, I still came in having a lot of idealistic views of everything. If I do things a certain way, everything will work out, and all the kids will like it. I didn't come in with an individualized perspective, and everything in real-time needs to be individualized based on the student. So, I think my students and the different experiences they brought in taught me a lot. I learned that it's okay to have different expectations for different students based on ages, experiences, and just based on the amount of sleep they got at night.

Lisa continued talking about what she learned by setting up structures and routines in her classroom.

I also think early on, I learned the importance of structure and routine. But then later on, as I started going through teaching, I learned the importance of making sure that it was
actually a responsive practice. So, there's always that push of, okay, breakfast has to end by a certain time, and I would really need to stick with it so we can get on with our day. And then, there’s the kid who comes in late and has to eat so quickly and just scarf it down. It's not fair to the kid. It puts them off on the wrong foot, and it makes me mad because I'm rushing them. And what my students and co-teacher really taught me a lot is taking a step back and thinking, why are we doing this? Because sometimes, I knew the purpose of having a routine and structure was so that me and the kids knew what to expect for the day, and that gave both of us stability. But then, if I'm really going into that routine and structure and thinking like, oh yeah, why is it that important if breakfast goes past when it's supposed to, and the food staff are okay with it? Why is it important that I get them over to the whole group on the carpet instead of letting them be at the table and just interact when they can? It's way more important to meet kids where they are than it is to stick to a restricted routine that isn't meeting their needs. So, just trying to make sure that every single thing I was doing, which again, didn't always happen, but trying to make sure I understood why are we doing this and why am I doing this, and how is this really serving the kids and what they're bringing to the classroom? Because there were some days when we had those lessons, and I felt like we were creating the curriculum together. And it just felt like this awesome child-focused teaching. Then there were some days where we did a lot of freeze dancing, and that's okay. That's fine. That's what we needed. Lisa went on to talk about another lesson that her students and families taught her.

So, when I was teaching, I thought I was going to go into social work. And the biggest thing that my kids and families taught me is that I am not great at the disassociation that you need. I would bring every single emotion, triumph, and struggle, including the highs
and the lows, home with me. Everything came home with me to be in the field of social work and also to be working with kids and families every day, especially kids and families that have challenges that they shouldn't be dealing with, but yet, they do. And I personally did not handle that well at all. So, I think that's something that I learned from kids and families in early childhood, especially how my school functioned. There was a very, very blurred line between providing emotional support for families and that partnership. I mean, that should be there when we're working, as educators, with families because, again, they are their kid's first primary educators at the end of the day, but I sometimes got a little lost in that. I sometimes put too much of myself and my feelings into taking on some of those more challenging conversations and didn't have the training. I was not yet a social worker, and I wasn't a Family Support Specialist. So, I think sometimes, especially early childhood educators, there's a blurred line there. So, I learned from my kids and families that I cared a lot about their well-being in the classroom, but I took everything home. I learned it really changed my path and what I was looking to do, and how I think I could best serve families and kids.

Lisa went on to tell me about her experience as a White educator working with students of color. She discussed earlier (in the teacher preparation section) that her program mainly recruited affluent White educators to work in communities that mostly had Black students. Lisa said, “When you have a majority of people that don't look like your students and who aren’t meeting their needs in the classroom, you have a huge problem.” Lisa understood there was an issue and did not feel that her program sent them out in these communities prepared to work with this specific population.
As we continued the conversation, I asked Lisa to talk to me about her experience working with students of color as a White educator. What she learned, what she expected, and her overall experience. This is what Lisa said,

Several things were to be expected in a preschool classroom that looks relatively similar across the board in certain aspects and in preschool kids. I knew what was expected in child development and what I learned from what I studied in college; the same things applied to every kid. But then, I think what was unexpected is I thought I came in being a little bit more prepared and how to be more culturally responsive for my students. I think it was unexpected how much everything that I had learned or tried to come in prepared for or attempted to be open-minded about kind of took a backseat when teaching got stressful. And so, I think what was unexpected wasn't anything kids brought and their backgrounds or what they brought to the table. It was more of my own lack of ability to meet them and their needs where they were at right away. And I think maybe more unexpected was how some of the ways that I even taught could reflect not just bias but a teaching practice that was more beneficial for me and where I came from versus my students. I think what was unexpected is that it happened more often than not. And then, when my coach came in, we would try to talk about how white supremacist structures could be in some of my teaching or practices, and I wouldn't even be aware of it. I think that was pretty eye-opening. I think it's also eye-opening when you have a coach, in general, tell you things about what you're doing. Still, to have that lens and that feedback, especially when I'm a white educator with all-black students, was critical and unexpected. Even though I knew it was coming but not in the grand scheme, I'd have to change multiple things and ask more questions. And fighting biases is hard. I think you just
expect that you are coming in with the best intentions and wanting to meet kids where they're at and help them thrive, but I wasn't, especially when you look at the racial dynamic between my kids and me.

Knowing that Lisa was a White educator working with all Black students during her teaching career, I asked her how she could support her students in her classroom. Lisa responded,

So, there were more formal ways. I intentionally planned ways to support them by seeing themselves in the classroom and feeling represented in a classroom that reflected them, which was the books that we had. Not only did I use books that looked like my students and reflected their experiences, but I also tried to implement other books. So, I think books were the biggest one, and then I think also just giving kids space in lessons. So, kids are not just learning how to write their names but looking more at themselves when they draw self-portraits which opened up the door for kids to talk about how they see themselves. I would help them connect that book or other books that helped them understand themselves. So, that was a little bit more how I did it intentionally, along with really encouraging parents to come into the classroom. I feel like I didn't do a lot of that my first year, even though when they asked, it was, please come in. That is so exciting. I would love that. I didn't realize parents would love to be invited and included in an intentional way because sometimes that space, even though we had the warm greeting in the morning and the warm goodbye at the end of the day, they felt like it's still a separate space that they're not necessarily invited into.

Lisa continued by saying,

We'd have show-and-tell every Friday my second year, which was so fun because the kids really liked it. We probably should have done it every day, but it would have been
too much. But it was also hard too when the kids left. So, if I had a kid leave in the middle of naptime, they'd be almost crying, “I didn’t do my show-and-tell.” So, I would have to go do a little show-and-tell with them by the cubby really quickly so they could do it because it was something they really looked forward to. And I think, at first, I was like, “Oh, this is just a cute thing.” Not really looking into it like it's where they could bring something from home that was really special to them, and then they could share it with all their friends. And then, on the other element, we got to learn how to ask questions that I didn't know as a preschool educator. I thought that would just come naturally. It's so hard to get kids to ask questions that make sense at that age.

Lisa continued explaining some ways that she worked with her students,

I would say informally the way that I worked with kids was dramatic play. That was a big one. They're going to talk about everything they do at home in dramatic play or even in blocks. Basically, our whole classroom was dramatic play in different ways. Not just playing with them but also talking to them about what we were playing. This helps with things that kids are going through daily that make them feel a little bit more accepted, and it helps them handle the highs and the lows. And then, in that play, other elements of identity and how that plays out in the classroom and at home also came out. But I was lucky to have my co-teacher, too, because she looked like my students and shared some of their experiences that I didn't share. And so we had a couple of instances where I had one student who was White passing and was not invited to a pretend party in dramatic play because she was White. And while I was asking questions, my co-teacher said, “I think it would be beneficial if I stepped in and talked with them about it.” Either one of us could have addressed it with the kids. However, I think it was beneficial for me to
have my co-teacher because not only does she share some of those experiences, but she also has been teaching for such a long time and already had the experience of how to navigate some of those trickier conversations with kids that maybe we’re surprised by at the moment. I shouldn't have been surprised by it, but still, I think as an early educator, it kind of caught me off guard. So, both of us having that conversation and being on equal footing with both being capable, but also her stepping in and having that conversation, I think, was really useful because kids are going to notice power dynamics. From their perspective, if they're starting to categorize and learn these power dynamics, it doesn't make the most sense as me significantly younger than my black educator always leading. That's something that I didn't want them to take away from preschool. The young White woman is technically above her older black counterpart is very problematic. I was lucky that my co-teacher also wanted to participate because she could have said, “I'm not getting paid to appear equal to you in the classroom.” So I was really lucky with that partnership. I think those informal moments are really powerful for students.

**Self-Awareness/Awakening**

In this last segment, we talked about when she was first awakened to self-awareness about culturally responsive teaching. One of the first questions I asked Lisa was how she became self-aware. Lisa said,

Well, I think, first and foremost, I had to put any fragility or defensiveness out the door because it just wasn't going to work out in those conversations. It also wasn't going to be best for my kids, my families, or even me in that classroom. It's not serving anyone, and I don't think that's super easy. I believe that it was easier for me at that moment because it was like I came in more as an open book because I was so inexperienced. But I still think
that's an intentional practice. But then, I don't think I was self-aware at all. I became more self-aware in those guiding conversations with my coach and other colleagues in my teaching program. I guess I thought self-awareness was not as intentional as it needed to be. And then it led to me really intentionally asking those questions, not just going when it popped up, “How could my bias be happening here?” Like making it a daily practice, thinking about how could my bias impact the day, and then later, how did it? I don't think there was a day that went by when my biases couldn't have come out. And maybe it didn't have an affect that day on the kids or me, or maybe it was minuscule, or maybe it actually didn't impact me, and I caught it in time, but my biases still came out daily. So, I think that made me way more self-aware, knowing that I'm not immune from the structure in place. And you know, my background and how I grew up are more a part of me than I want to acknowledge.

I then asked Lisa how important it is to have self-awareness when working with students of color. Lisa responded,

I think it was essential because otherwise, I could and probably would come in and potentially have some harmful teaching practices that might reflect more of me and my identity versus what's actually serving my kids of color.

I then asked Lisa what she thinks would help one become more self-aware when working with this population. Lisa said,

Well, I think having some guidance, like a partner, whether it's another teaching staff or some type of thought partner, in helping create that self-awareness because that was not something that I knew, had the tools, or knew how to access those tools to get to that self-awareness that I needed. Or, at least, trying to have that intentional awareness practice
daily. Having that coach and then having those conversations with other colleagues really helped. It doesn't necessarily need to be a coach or teacher program colleagues, but I think having someone come in to work with you, whether it could be parallel to or with you in your classroom. Having someone with an objective angle to help you look at any biases or anything that you know you could be doing in the classroom that you're not aware of is helpful.

When I asked Lisa about her awakening experience, Lisa recalled,

I think it's hard for me to have one awakening, specifically as a White person. I feel like we're always kind of a little bit asleep still. I think that every year, I'm trying to wake up more. I don't know if that makes sense. But I would say that's when it started more. Probably in college, some elements were building me there, but I think, unfortunately, for my students, I don't think that really happened until I began teaching. So, the fact that I had that when I was teaching, at least it happened, and I was trying to be more intentional with it, but it would have been way more beneficial for them if I had been more self-aware and more intentional with how I was coming into the class. I mean, there were so many things I could have done before stepping into that classroom.

Lisa ended the segment by saying,

I was really, really, really lucky to have the kids and families I did because they gave me a lot of grace. It was a good match, and they were willing to work with me a lot. So that was really valuable. And I think, looking back, that I wish I had not taken that for granted as much, knowing that it could be more unique than not.
Reflections and Summary to Lisa

Lisa’s interview was very open, honest, and transparent. I enjoyed hearing her perspective from a White educator who spent her teaching years working with students of color. Lisa knew that when coming into the classroom working with students of color, she was unprepared to give them the meaningful experiences they deserved. Lisa talked about her biases and how she sometimes had biases that she was unaware of, especially in the teaching practices she did with her students. Lisa emphasized the importance of having coaches or someone while in your teacher prep program that helps support you in the classroom while learning all the things that you did not learn while in the program. I appreciated Lisa’s interview because it’s not easy telling someone you were not what your students needed as a White educator at the beginning of your career because you didn’t know much. It was a joy listening to all of the experiences and lessons she learned from her students and how she has applied them to her current work.

Scene Four: Sarah

Sarah’s interview was unique and came from a different perspective. Out of all the participants, Sarah was the only one who was an early childhood educator and also offered the perspective of a program coordinator of a teacher preparation program. Sarah brought a different take to the interview than the other three participants. Because she holds an administrative perspective, she could tell me whether she felt her program was culturally responsive and how she ensures that our educators are prepared to work with students of color.

Sarah is the coordinator of an early childhood teacher preparation program at a community college. Sarah was an adjunct professor at the college for about two years before taking on the full-time Coordinator/Assistant Professor role in 2020. Not only is she the program coordinator, but she also serves on many boards throughout the state that is working to address
the teacher shortage and prepare high-quality teachers in the process. Sarah is a Bi-racial female in her 40s with a doctorate in Educational Leadership. Before her current position, she worked in various occupations such as social services and child welfare, federal programs, early head start (EHS) and head start (HS), and The Institution of Higher Education.

Who is Sarah?

I asked Sarah to tell me about herself, where she went to school, where she worked, and her family upbringing.

I got into early childhood as a fluke. My major was Hotel Motel lodging. I was in business because I was in love with James Brolin, and he had a so-called Hotel. So that's what I wanted to do. So, I was in a hotel motel lodging and used to cook professionally at CSU. Every time we took the meals to the Head Start room, they had to come looking for me because I was in there reading the books, in circle time, and doing all that stuff. When I got my bachelor's degree, I was the only person who was not working, and I did a project for a group, and we all got an 'A.' I did all the research because everybody else was working. And then a girl asked me, “What can I do for you?” I said, “Give me a job.” She said, “Do you have a sanitation license?” I said, “Yes, I do.” She had me work at CNH. I started as a teacher in a three-to-five-year classroom. We had a parent-child center, and then I wrote the grant so we could wrap the Head Start in 1998.

Sarah continued telling me about her education and work experience.

And then, after that, my director went to church with somebody who needed a teacher with a bachelor's degree, and I went into early childhood. So, after then, it became more oversight because I was working on my master's. I was the disabilities coordinator as soon as I came out of the classroom. That's why my Master's is in disability. By the time I
got my Master's, I was the program director. That's why my doctorate is in educational leadership. And so, after that, my experience just became the supervision in terms of the classroom because I had been there and I had supervised. I mean, they were my friends, but it's hard to be a peer and then be a supervisor. I was young, with no children---a fresh husband. But I figured it out. I had to outthink them, outwork them, and out-dress them. I designed the new center in the Englewood area, and Caty asked me for a couple of months to come back. The President of the organization was even like she could name her salary. After I turned that down, I was a federal peer reviewer for ten years for the Head Start program. I used to go all around the country with a team of experts and whatever area they assigned me to. In the beginning, it was the classroom because I was CLASS certified, then I moved into health and safety, and then I moved into doing the family community. Then I moved into the program design and management. But I did that for about ten years. Then, I started working at Chicago Public School as a quality assurance consultant, and it was about quality, compliance, and things like that. Then my sorority sister, Caty, hired me. So, Caty went on to the place that fired me to be the VP, and when she went back there, they asked her, “Do you know anybody that could get Early Head Start together?” She said, I only know one person, and I'll see if she could do it. They would let me name my salary, give me all my sick time, and all of my time that I lost when they fired me. And I told her, No. And, so yeah, life is full circle and is giving me chills. And then, I came here, and that's why I'm in this role. But I never taught college before I was an adjunct. And that's my story of academia. I wish I would have known 20 years ago to teach a class every semester.

Sarah continued telling me about herself by talking about her family,
So, the reason that my parents are not together is that my father passed 20 years ago. I was born in Kansas at Forbes Air Force Base Hospital because my father was an airman. I'm a Catholic school girl and went to Catholic school my whole life. Then I went to Carbondale as my first college experience. I have three siblings who are younger than me, and I have one brother who is older than me. His mother and my father were high school sweethearts.

Sarah continued by telling me about her upbringing.

So, I started nursery school; that's how old I am. It was called a nursery school back then. They would only take three-year-olds, but back then, I was chunky and big my whole life. I never played with dolls or anything like that. I always played with trucks. And so, my grandmother’s friend owned Betty's nursery school in the city right under the viaduct. My mother worked downtown at Illinois bail. She would get on that IC train, drop me off right there, and get on the IC train until we moved to the house she's in now on April Fool's Day, 1971. Before that, when I came from Kansas, I lived with my grandma. And that was my upbringing. I was a Brownie Scout, Girl Scout, and Senior Scout. I sold cookies every year and went to Wisconsin Dells every year—typical compliant child. In my dating experience, I had the same boyfriend from eighth grade to high school to the first year of college. When I got married, I was engaged five and a half years before I married him. I didn't want to live out of wedlock because I got little sisters at home. Even though it didn't work out, I tried to do what I was supposed to.

Teacher Preparation Program

While talking about her upbringing, Sarah began to discuss her education and how she got into the field of early childhood. Below is her in-depth story of her experience and role as a
program coordinator in a teacher preparation program. My first question asked Sarah about her program and her relationships with her peers.

I always got along with my classmates, and I worked in groups. I went to a public university to finish up my Bachelor's. It was a cohort, and then the Master’s degree was in a smaller program. So, you only have one or two instructors. We had good relationships with them and could build relationships with them when you took certain classes each semester. And it was the same thing with my doctorate program. At first, it was a cohort of 22-23 students, then they added another cohort of 22-23, so it was 45 of us moving through the two-and-a-half, three-year program simultaneously. And so, we studied together; we worked together; we presented together, you know, we asked questions together.

Once Sarah finished talking about her program, I asked her to tell me about the program she currently works in as the program coordinator. The conversation shifted to talk about her roles and responsibilities in the program.

Because my program is small, I am the main instructor, but I'm building my program one student at a time so my adjuncts can teach more courses because it's wearing me out. With being an instructor and a coordinator, it depends on what time of year it is. So, on November 1, I just submitted all the books I needed for spring. You have to submit your schedules. You have to make sure you maintain office hours. You have to participate in college committees and in, college meetings, and some parts of a department meeting every month. I'm a part of the assessment Council and the curriculum committee. You could pick whatever two, but you have to be a part of it. So, if I'm not doing something like that or trying to connect with my students, I'm trying to do some outreach because
with the new ECACE grant, there are many moving parts. I work with navigators to make sure that they connect me to people who are interested in attending my program. I work with mentors, whose role is to follow up with students and make sure that they're navigating through college alright, that they don't want to drop out, and that they have books. So, this year, I bought two students’ books because I found out they didn't have books. I put it in the budget to buy books.

Sarah talked about everything being a process when trying to help her students.

Everything at the college is a process, and I'm learning just because I have the money to buy the books, they have to assign it according to a GL code. Who does that? The grant person. I'm learning a lot about the processes. I'm learning about financial aid as well. I thought if you completed the financial aid, it would be okay. No, it's not completed until you come back and sign and say yes, I allow for the college to use my federal benefit. I had a student who got a hold for $700 because she didn't know to come back and sign that document. So, the ECACE grant that she did have is now as null and void because that was for the summer. But guess what I did? So, another function to keep all of these parts together is I have regular meetings. So once a week, I meet with financial aid, the bursar's office, and advising because those are the three people my students need to be successful. They need to go through financial aid, make sure that they don't have a hold at that the bursar, and then take the right class; so now I meet with them once a week. I meet with the mentors once a month. I meet with the navigators. And so, just navigating successful college life for students has a lot of moving parts. Of course, it makes sense that they have all the things that they need to succeed, whether it's financial aid or books.
And then, it was due on November 1, the official course outlines, and it's time for me to update it. We update it every three years.

We then started talking about how the curriculum is made in the program.

So, I inherited the curriculum. Some things I have enhanced or changed. For example, one of the changes I am going to make, as I am now in the process of reviewing the official course outlines, is to add to the official course outline that you must be a gateway registry member. (A Gateways Registry Membership offers a quick and easy way to track a person’s training and education online and meets Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) licensing requirements- JT). Prior, it was only needed in my 104 class. Now in order for you to apply for the grant, you need your gateways number. So, that's one of the things I am changing. I'm also looking at observation hours because the internship has a lot of hours, but to me, it doesn't take into account if you're already in the field and we're dealing with this ECACE grant, and it is for incumbent workers. It has reminded me that you don't need this many internship hours if you're doing the work every single day. The internship hours are designed for those that don't have the experience. So, I think it should be separated if you’re full-time, part-time, or not field related. Because what it does is put an undue burden.

She continued talking about how a course can be set up,

The official course outline is how you know how to set your syllabus up. It is an outline with the curriculum standards that the curriculum committee approves every three years when the Higher Learning Commission says, “Hey, you're a good college.” Everybody expects that because you have to have a standard curriculum in order to have a transferable college course.
I then asked Sarah how one would create the curriculum for the early childhood courses. She responded,

So, I look at the learning objectives of the previous things that the people who accredit colleges or universities set. I see what their expectations are, and I would make sure that it aligns with my philosophy. And then, if it doesn't, I will add to it. So, let's take constructivists, behaviorists, and developmentalist. If they have a curriculum that's heavy in maturation, every objective you want me to give the students is based on them just living and getting older. Okay, I'm not going to change it because they have a standard like that. It is probably the norm-referenced against other colleges and universities in the state and other ones in the United States. So, I will add it to our program. I'm a constructivist. I believe in Piaget, Erickson, and Vygotsky. I'm not going to change what the standard is; I'm going to add to it because it is a benefit that some things you learn as you get older, and one of them is emotional intelligence.

I then asked Sarah how she makes her students in the program self-aware, ensuring that they do what they should be doing in the field. Sarah answered,

One of the things is that I go with them on an observation. I took a class today, and after they observed, we came back and sat Indian-style in the center of the conference room and talked about the observations. What did you learn? What did you do? I didn't give them a checklist that's easy; anecdotal, narrative write down everything. I wanted them to tell me what did they learn? How could they do it better? What do you think you could improve on, if anything? How did they learn what theorists to recognize in the teaching? So, when we talk about it, I talk to them in terms of theory. After we went over the questions on the 12-month ASQ (Ages & Stages Questionnaire), I said Hey, what theorist
is that? What question do you think is connected to that? Why is that? Trust versus mistrust. Tell me what that is. Read it to me. Tell me how you have seen it in life. And then we go over the PowerPoint. I say so now you see why it’s important for children to say bye to their parents and have a departure ritual instead of their parents sneaking out because it doesn't feel trusting to sneak away. I might disagree with it, but if you tell me you are leaving, I probably will believe you’re coming back. But if you don't tell me you’re leaving, I don’t know if you’re coming back. So, I try to teach them by example, from the text, from my experience, and then like I said, this year I actually went with them. And one of the reasons I went with them is the location was one that I got some cohort students from, and so I got to check on them. I got to talk to the director with whom I went to high school, and then I got to stay there with them and debrief with them after they came out of the classroom.

I asked Sarah if going with her students in the field gives them a better chance at understanding the curriculum and how to work with students. Sarah responded,

It does because they come from small mom-and-pop centers, usually started by somebody’s grandmama who's retired or somebody who thinks they got to go to the bank. You are teaching a person who takes a picture of the check. It's a disconnect. So, you get to see the benefits of both and how it best serves you. You can’t throw away everything somebody did historically because it might have some value. You got to see what you could use, but I talk to them in theory. I give them two or three stale jokes to keep them engaged.
Once we talked about the process of making curriculum and how she supports her students in the field, we began discussing whether her program's curriculum supports culturally responsive teaching. Sarah said,

I think the curriculum supports culturally responsive teaching because the early childhood curriculum was designed to support culturally responsive teaching. An African American lady designed the approach. And so one of the courses in particular that we teach, the textbook, is called *Teaching Young Children in Multicultural Classrooms: Issues, Concepts, and Strategies*. The inside cover has the teaching standards alignment. Another reason why I think the curriculum supports and its awareness is because all of the instructors except one are people of color. And just like the belief that people of color should be the authors of their textbooks, I believe that if you’re teaching people of color, then the instructor should look like that because it’s connected to their self-esteem and their knowledge that the students know that they do matter and that they can achieve.

Sarah went on to explain why she felt her program’s curriculum supports culturally responsive teaching and why she thinks it’s sufficient. In addition to her talking about having a staff of color, Sarah elaborated,

I also plan on updating the official course outlines and the textbooks for the most current manual. The most current multicultural book for the classroom and the curriculum, and I also plan on adding the cultural standards to the supplemental materials. And so even if I'm not teaching it, the adjuncts know to look at the official course outline and build their syllabus. The third thing is to make sure that the cultural standards are not only supplemental to the official course outline for the college but that they are a part of every syllabus created under the NAEYC standards, the culturally appropriate standards. So to
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recap, having the authors who represent whatever the text is from that culture, making sure that it is official with the college as supplemental materials. And then make sure the day-to-day reflects cultural practices because it'll be a part of the syllabus.

The last question I asked Sarah in this segment is how long she thinks it will take to get everybody on the same page regarding how we prepare educators. Sarah states, I think it'd be 25 years, and let me tell you why. It has to go to another generation. I think it's still going to take a generation because they just started bringing up CRT, Critical Race Theory. In the last maybe five years, it's been a real hot topic. Critical Race Theory is really that you've been lying all this time and putting it in the books.

Culture

I asked Sarah to tell me a story about a time when she learned something about the culture from one of her students and their families, what it taught her, and the lesson that was learned.

So sometimes, when I teach, I'll do an icebreaker. And I learned that even though it's a small thing, everyone doesn't have turkey at the holidays. Instead of how you like your turkey because I got into a fried turkey that year, now I ask what is your tradition that your family does around the holidays if you celebrate. As opposed to assuming everyone is a turkey person because that's based on my cultural reference when I ask the person, I make sure that I include some more open-ended words, as opposed to close-ended ones. I would say that the lesson I learned is not to pose a closed-ended question based on my cultural frame of reference but to have it more open-ended and inviting the diversity of cultures.

I then asked her what role culture played in the classroom or society. Sarah said,
I think it is understanding that culture will provide equity and inclusion, which will then equate to opportunity for everyone. For example, sometimes people can be qualified for a job, and because of their culture, they won't get the opportunity to be chosen. They will hire based on their cultural reference for the person that will be the best candidate. So, I think it will provide equity, which will allow people to be included in conversations so you can get to know me, and then I think more opportunities will occur. And this is true whether it relates to childcare, Illinois tax law, a mechanic, or the person that's in charge of the banana room at Jewel Osco. I think because people assume like I did, that everybody eats turkey. There is nothing wrong with duck, Cornish hen, ham, fried ribs, or if you want to have Subway on the oppressor's holiday.

In the classroom, Sarah said,

You should only buy the cultural books written by a person of that culture. And so, if you have an equity and inclusion division, it should not be a Caucasian person because equity inclusion is not for the Caucasian race; but is for everyone of color.

Politics of Education

I then asked Sarah to talk about the constraints of culturally responsive teaching and why things changed from a child-focused perspective to more of a standardized approach.

A couple of things. If I'm ignorant about race as an adult, I'm ignorant about race as a child. I think that I'm the elitist person sitting on a pedestal, and I know what children of a certain race need, so child-centered is that you’re looking at what the students need and following their interests. And so, I think that's one of the things that has changed because they did not want to follow the child's interest. It was easier to label him as ADD than to understand Howard Gardner and that people learn differently and process differently.
And so, the other part, I think, is why things have changed because of the whole thing with critical race theory. I believe that non-black people don't want to admit that or people without color. I'm trying to say it politically correct. I don't think that they want to acknowledge that people of color have some benefits and some things to add, whether it is black, brown, yellow, red, or whatever the skin is, and I think that they get so caught up on critical race theory that they did not want to take the blame for it. Because they'll say it wasn't me. It was my ancestors. Apple trees bear apple fruit. The reason why it's continuing is that you all are passing that down, so the whole thing with critical race theory is that I don't want you to know how racist I am. So, they would rather keep a lie in a textbook instead of telling the truth. And when you think about the textbook publishers, the field of education, and its ethnicity, nobody wants to tell on themselves. So, I think it has changed to more of, I know these little babies, they don't know, their parents on the hill. That's my perception.

She continued by talking about how the elephant in the room is racist policies that don’t benefit African Americans.

The elephant in the room is that racism still exists, right? When you could kill George Floyd in front of everybody caught on video, and they wonder if they'll give you some jail time. It has not changed. So, you can make policies. You made policies in 1920 that women had the right to vote, but it wasn't all women. You had to come back and do the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, and then you got to put on a referendum in some states every 20 years to let African Americans have the right to vote. So, it is living the policies, procedures, laws, and rules; it’s not creating them. You have to internalize it and believe it, and they don't. Standardization is based on who?
Sarah continues by highlighting the discriminating nature of standardized tests:

White people were the standard. That's why our children don't do as well because, on the test, it says the word “plunder.” Not unless they were a pirate do they know what plunder means. If you say rob, steal, it's a lick, get the hookup, we know what it is. We don't necessarily know plunder. And so, the people who created it think they must not be intelligent because they don't know the word plunder. So, we want to keep that standard.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching and Working with Students of Color**

I asked Sarah to talk about her experience with culturally responsive teaching.

To me, culturally responsive teaching is continuously asking and learning about the culture that I have limited or unknown knowledge of. Just because my race is African American doesn’t mean that my culture is the same as the next African American person. Everybody has a different culture. And so, seeking out and asking questions helps you become culturally sensitive. For example, I celebrate Kwanzaa every year; the next person may not. So, asking about celebrations, holidays, and things that are important to them is one of the ways to make sure that I am culturally sensitive.

Another thing is, in my classroom learning environment, I try to have multiculturalism within the learning environment. I'm looking at a display of dolls now; among them are all three different races. The other way I stay culturally sensitive is that I follow some of the guidelines and expectations from the multicultural class in terms of the concepts and strategies that they have. One of the things for materials of literature, I look at the person who wrote it to see if they are actually from that culture. And so, of course, you could learn some things vicariously but have some authenticity to it. But that's what culturally responsive teaching means to me and respecting how students, in general, interact with
teachers. Sometimes people are reared not to question authority, teachers, or instructors. To view a teacher as the expert and never ask them things that might be disrespectful.

And so, some of the things I do continuously ask, continuously learn, is to make sure that materials and writings are from people who represent that culture.

Sarah continued to talk about how culturally responsive teaching is expressed in the coursework for her students. Earlier in the interview, she mentioned some of the ways when she spoke about textbooks written by authors of that particular culture. In addition, she said,

I think what makes it easy is to start with definitions. When you look at what does it mean to be responsive? What does it mean to be responsive to culture? And I think a basis of culturally responsive teaching, outside of using the materials that are from the textbook book about Asian American history, actually from Asian Americans, I think it is important that you honor all differences and that you're truthful. And so, one of the things about culturally responsive responsiveness is that it is not the truth. It is the viewpoint of the world and the people who rule the world.

Sarah continued,

So, I think with culturally responsive teaching, you should not view being different as less than, but you should view being different as the same or better. And I think that gives you a good starting ground for interacting with people of different cultures and being honest and learning from them. You have to remove the assumptions. If you don't know, you have to ask them, be open, not assume, not judge, and recognize that different could be the same or better as opposed to less than.

I then asked Sarah what some of the benefits of increasing teachers’ work with students of color or culturally responsive teaching in the classroom are. Sarah said, “I would say it
encourages them to be leaders and go into the field when they see representation that looks like them.”

One of the final questions I asked Sarah was if she thought we should increase teacher awareness, accepting the role of culture in the classroom, and how it could be done. Sarah responded, “Yes, we should do it by having more people of color teach. That’s it. White teachers can teach black students and have no frame of reference.”

Lastly, I asked Sarah how, in her ideal world, could school and teacher preparation programs act as a place where culture is respected and celebrated and then transfer that into the classroom for students. She responded,

In an ideal world, the amount of non-white teachers would flip and represent the number of white teachers at all levels. So, to put them as the minority and take power away or have them coated. I don't want to say I want to put them out of a job, but it is just no way for a man to tell me about my body. It is no way for a Caucasian person to tell me about my African existence. Every three years, you don't live in my shoes, you don't walk in my shoes, you don't have to worry about it. Therefore, you can’t tell me how to be me.

**Reflections and Summary to Sarah**

Overall, Sarah’s interview was quite interesting because it presented a different perspective. With Sarah being the only participant who is a program coordinator of an early childhood teacher preparation program, she was able to give insight into how she creates curriculum and plans to incorporate more culturally responsive teaching in her curriculum. It was also nice to see how she supports her students in her program and ensures that the program is suitable for all the students enrolled. Sarah was very clear about the place that culture should take in the program, especially when working with students of color. She believes that textbooks
and staff should reflect the population the curriculum serves because it mirrors how students, the future early childhood teachers, can support their students in their own classrooms. Overall, Sarah’s interview gave me a better understanding of what it takes to adjust the curriculum and if it can be done to ensure students are well-prepared for the field.

**What’s Next?**

Chapter 4 serves as a basis for being able to analyze Chapter 5. In this chapter, I collected data from four different participants that brought some of the same ideas and issues while presenting very different ideas and issues that they each faced in their preparation programs. These interviews will allow me to explain, in-depth, the similarities and differences of each participant in chapter 5.
Chapter V

Interpretation of The Study

The topic of my study looked at how teacher preparation programs prepare educators to work with students of color. Therefore, this discussion will interpret the four in-depth interviews I did with three early childhood educators and one program coordinator of an early childhood teacher preparation program. This chapter will discuss five main topics: a. present the interpretation of the data and my findings; b. explain the meaning, importance, and significance of the study’s findings and insights; c. answer the research questions; d. consider their practical implications, and e. reflect on my research journey. (The five topics include interpretation, answering my research questions, the validity of my study, practical and future implications, and my reflections on the whole journey.)

Interpretations and Findings

While I interviewed four women who are all early childhood educators, they all had very different journeys on how they got into the field, how prepared they felt, and whether or not they were truly prepared to teach students of color. I mostly asked each participant the same questions to get an understanding of their stories, and how they were very different in their thinking, they were also similar in some ways. There were five major themes that emerged from the interviews. I came up with these themes as I read through each interview after transcribing them. I looked at all of the data and thought about what I wanted to know to answer my research questions. I searched for ideas that kept coming up during the interview. I reread and listened to the interviews to see what stood out among all the participants while talking about a specific topic and making those connections. After I listened is where I came up with the main themes. I then began to sort through all of the data to find the quotes to reflect those themes that emerged
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through the study. Within this analysis of the data, I compared and contrasted the positions, perspectives, and opinions proposed by each participant in the interpretation.

Some of the themes I will discuss that all four participants mentioned are below:

1. Feeling prepared by teaching programs to work with students.
2. Culture and how a student’s Identity is formed through it.
3. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT).
4. Educators’ Self-awareness.
5. The impact of the politics of education on being culturally responsive

To help me explain the above themes, I inserted a table that will allow you to visually see a snippet of what each participant thought on a particular theme.

**Culture**

Although I did not consider culture as an essential aspect of my research questions, I discovered through the interviews that culture was important because the participants talked about many elements of culture that could come into the classroom experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture- Jackie</th>
<th>Culture- Sarah</th>
<th>Culture- Tiff</th>
<th>Culture- Lisa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture as forming identity.</td>
<td>Culture as representing tradition.</td>
<td>Culture is individual and impacts them.</td>
<td>Culture represents how children really learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture is a form of intersectionality.</td>
<td>Diversity of cultures and the opportunities it provides for equity.</td>
<td>Your culture makes up who you are, how you operate, what you believe in, and your values.</td>
<td>Feeling valued and accepted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get to know your students.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intersectionality is not acknowledged enough.</td>
<td>Intersectionality is not acknowledged enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect and meet students.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Can sometimes focus on the problems too much and not the beauty and positivity of respecting those kids’ culture.</td>
<td>Can sometimes focus on the problems too much and not the beauty and positivity of respecting those kids’ culture.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In response to my question about the role of culture, three out of four (Jackie, Tiff, and Lisa) believed that culture forms a person’s identity. As Jackie said, 

Culture is everything in the classroom and society as a whole. You know, culture is part of all of our identities, right? So, it’s part of who each and every one of us is. We can't, I can't relate to, or I can't see my students without having an understanding of their culture. 

Relationship building with students is essential in understanding the realness of who students are and their culture (Hansen, 2018). Knowing that culture forms a student’s identity should be the primary reason educators should want to get to know their students and their community lifestyle and cultural background. However, I do understand that sometimes it can be hard when the teacher has not come to understand who they (the teacher) are as it relates to their culture and identity. 

Whereas Tiff (2022, p. 3) said, “How you define your culture is who you know, what makes up who you are and how you operate, and what you believe in; your value.” She also said, “Culture impact how you interact with others. It has the potential to enrich an experience when you allow it to have its place.” 

For some researchers, one’s culture is reflected in one’s identity. The last participant that mentioned identity as a part of culture was Lisa. Lisa talked about when we don’t know or understand our students’ cultures, we begin to have a problem. She said: 

Not understanding culture diminishes culture and the beauty that each of these intersections of our identity brings because we focus a lot on the challenges that come with it, like not being a part of dominant white supremacy culture. 

All three of the participants thoroughly explained why and how culture impacts the identity of their students. They also explained the importance of understanding students’ cultures to be able
to meet their needs in the classroom. This point that they made was also consistent with the research. Redding (2019) states that in order for teachers to be effective in their teaching, they must have a strong understanding of their students’ culture. Spies (2011) also talks about how sometimes teachers focus on “best practices” that they don’t pay attention to and consider a student’s culture, family, and community values and ways of life. Although Sarah did not directly say and discuss identity in her interview, she did talk about culture as learning the traditions of your students and that the diversity of cultures opens the door for opportunities that will eventually foster equity. This, too, is a form of identity because these traditions that surround the students as they grow up are a part of who they are. All of the interviewed educators seem to understand the significance of valuing their student’s culture when in the classroom.

Reflections on Culture

As I reflect on the cultural section of the interview, the participants and I seem to think about it, for the most part, the same way. Culture is the way that one is defined, and it is also what helps students understand who they are; identity. Coming from being a person that has taken culture courses and taught culture courses, I can say that it is essential for everyone; the teacher and students. Culture, to me, is how one can relate and build those foundational relationships with students that will be needed as teachers go on this educational journey with students. Once educators take the time to learn the students they are working with, I believe this is when we will start seeing better results in the classroom because then students will likely feel more valued and heard, as opposed to just going to school and being in the numbers. Like Sarah said, understanding a student’s culture could foster equity in the learning environment.

Politics of Education
By politics of education, I refer to the accountability to curriculum standards, pressures of policies, and insufficient financial sources to find what students need. The chart below represents the responses from the participants about the politics of education as we talked about their experiences being teachers.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher pressure to be accountable to specific standards.</td>
<td>Standardized is based on “the who,” not the what. Curriculum standards play a role in how education is set up.</td>
<td>Standardized because of money. Policy reform.</td>
<td>Not putting enough money in. Meeting deadlines and other things that need to be done. The pressure of policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting standards have taken away the creativity of teaching. May be missing some students, but have to keep the job. Accountability plus the lack of time to get things done. Districts are under pressure.</td>
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During this segment of the interviews, I looked at the different constraints that educators believe are a barrier to successfully being responsive to their students. The one thing that Jackie, Tiff, and Sarah all talked about was the standards behind education. They each discussed how top-down standards have come into the picture and removed the child-centered approach because in order to get funded, they need to meet the state’s goals and standards by the end of the school year. Strickland-Dixon (2011, p. 113) quotes Marsh and Willis (1999) to support this point by saying, “Many policy statements about curriculum limit the school’s ability to make decisions about their own individual needs.” As Jackie, Tiff, and Sarah said, the politics of education
makes it hard to reach their students because they have to complete certain standards by the end of the year, in which, most times, some students get lost in the process.

Jackie and Lisa both talked about the different pressures that teachers are under in the classroom, where they cannot always focus on the needs of their students. They have several deadlines that they need to meet to keep their jobs. For example, Lisa talked about having a million things to do daily, including paperwork, screenings, and checkpoints, which resulted in her inability to focus on individualized instruction. In addition, Jackie said that because of the pressure she was under while in the classroom, she may have missed some students, but her main focus was trying to keep her job. She also talked about how administrators don’t always understand what they need in the classroom. The reason is that they are answering to the pressures of the state for funding. Both Jackie and Lisa saw how the pressures that teachers face hinder how they can support and work with students of color. Strickland-Dixon (2011) talks about this situation in her work, “Scholars conveying the tragedies that exist for African American students in the public school setting would argue that the academic failure is the direct result of the public education system” (p. 113). This statement by Strickland-Dixon speaks exactly to what Jackie and Lisa discussed during their interviews. Because teachers have to follow this standardized top-down model, instruction falls off. Students are experiencing inequities in education because their teachers have too many other things to focus on before meeting students’ needs and where they are. Connecting this to my research question, it seems that even if teachers are getting the things required to succeed in the classroom, the school system plays a significant role in how teachers operate in the classroom setting.

Lisa and Tiff also brought up the money aspect of education. They both noticed that money plays a significant role in how things are run in education based on meeting the needs of
the funders. Lisa talked about how although they are investing money, they are not putting enough capital into the right areas of early childhood, which is an issue when talking about supporting teachers and their classroom practices. Tiff discussed how money is what she believes made them move from a child-centered approach to a more standardized one. As Tiff stated, they need to be able to track where the funds are going in their programs and need to be able to see the growth in places they are sowing their money, which is an indication to funders that the money is being used appropriately. Because you can’t track child-centered in the way they need you to, the standardized curriculum became a thing because they were able to put numerical data into those funds.

Lastly, another similar thing in three of the four interviews was the conversation on standardized curriculum. Jackie talked about how having a standardized curriculum takes away the creativity of teaching because she was focused on meeting the standards. It took away the idea of meeting her students where they were and the thought of what she could do to help her students and get them to where they needed to be. Although Lisa discussed standardized curriculum, she looked at it from a different angle. She talked about the standard being based on “the who,” which instantly puts students of color in a bind. Students of color are not the ones that are the base for those standards. In short, the things that currently are happening in education are greatly influenced by the people in administrative positions, including state and federal policies, that make decisions and are setting standards for all students. Their norms and standards are not meeting the needs of the students in particular settings and are not helpful when local educators are using those guidelines to create the curriculum for their students.

**Reflections on Policies**
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Based on the responses of my participants, I learned that policy plays a huge role in why some of our students cannot be supported. If educators have to spend most of their time keeping up with goals and standards from the state, who answer to the feds, how can they meet their students’ needs, let alone individualize it enough to reach each student where they are? Sometimes, these pressures push educators to remove their idea of how and what they thought they wanted to teach to keep their jobs. Based on the responses from the participants, it seems that educators are not the only ones under this type of pressure from the state, but the administration is as well. This goes back to the accountability practices that are put in place and must be followed to continue receiving funding, which controls what takes place in our classrooms.

**Teacher Preparation Program and Teachers’ Readiness for Culturally Responsive Teaching**

The chart below shows responses from the participants as we discussed their teacher preparation programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Prep Program - Jackie</th>
<th>Teacher Prep Program - Sarah</th>
<th>Teacher Prep Program - Tiff</th>
<th>Teacher Prep Program - Lisa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residency program- learned on the job.</td>
<td>Chicago State cohort.</td>
<td>TPP at UIC.</td>
<td>Teach for America- alternative licensure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not have a student teaching experience.</td>
<td>Program Coordinator of ECE prep program.</td>
<td>Does not recall too much culturally.</td>
<td>The level of feeling prepared to work with students of color.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher Leader program taught cultural competence.</td>
<td>Plans to add cultural standards to the syllabus.</td>
<td>Having professors that look like you. Professor representation should match student representation.</td>
<td>She did not feel that she had adequate teacher preparation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL endorsement used a cultural perspective.</td>
<td>Wants to support cultural competence.</td>
<td>Beginnings of self-awareness and understanding.</td>
<td>Including CRT and awareness are important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prep programs should incorporate CRT.</td>
<td>The curriculum supports culturally responsive teaching with staff.</td>
<td>Necessary to have a staff of color.</td>
<td>Have a longer time in the program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this segment, I delve in-depth into the conversation about the participants’ preparation programs and how they felt they were prepared to work with students of color. This theme was the most interesting part of the interviews because the participants authentically relived their program experiences. Although they all went through some sort of preparation program, they all had very different experiences in how they were prepared. They all felt very differently regarding how prepared they felt working with students of color. One thing that was pretty consistent amongst three of the four participants was that none of their programs really taught cultural awareness when working with students. Jackie, who completed a residency program, talked about how she was not taught anything that would have helped her understand students’ culture in her main teacher preparation program. However, she mentioned that when she returned for her ESL endorsement, that was the first time she had a chance to stop and think about things from a cultural perspective.

Similarly, Tiff, who completed a licensure program, stated that she does not remember anything too much about culture in her program. Lisa, who attended an alternative licensure teaching program, said that although her program attempted to provide classes focused on culturally responsive teaching, these classes were not always at the forefront of teaching because the program she attended was not long and moved quickly.

From a different perspective, Sarah, the program coordinator, talked about how the curriculum in her program supports culturally responsive teaching because she is adding cultural
 standards to each of her syllabi. These standards intend to ensure that students become familiar with this form of teaching to make her program more culturally responsive than it currently is. Although this conversation came from an administrative standpoint, I can understand what she is trying to do by adding these standards. It seems that by Sarah adding these cultural standards to her courses, her students will be able to exhibit this sort of awareness that her program has not offered in the past. I’m not sure that cultural responsiveness will necessarily be taught by only adding cultural responsiveness standards, but through having conversations surrounding these standards and what practices should be like in the classroom.

The next thing that two participants shared was the idea of making teacher preparation more diversified with the staff. When programs are preparing educators to work with students of color, what they are being asked to do should also be reflected in their programs, and they will then (hopefully) know what that means. According to Cherng and Halpin (2016), “Students have more favorable perceptions of Black and Latino teachers than White teachers” (p. 411). Sarah talked about not only having staff that looks like their students but also having authors of the books that represent their particular culture. When students see people that look like them in the classroom, they gain a different type of confidence. Tiff agreed that having mentors and professors of color in these programs can make it easier to navigate some of the conversations that educators need to know and have. From Sarah and Tiff’s words, I believe that we will have more prepared educators if we model what we want to see in the classroom in teacher preparation programs.

Lisa overall brought a different outlook on the discussion, maybe because she was the only White female participant in the study. Lisa was deeply aware that when she entered the classroom, she was not as prepared as she thought she was. Lisa admitted that her program did
not provide adequate teacher preparation to feel successful in the classroom. She did not feel they prepared her to implement students’ culture or represent their family or community backgrounds in her teaching or any element within the classroom and school.

When asked about self-awareness, three of the participants' last big point about their programs was that it was not fully supported or taught. Tiff noted that her program had the beginnings of teaching self-awareness through weekly journal reflections. Lisa said that although the instructors tried to give her the tools she needed to go on a self-awareness journey, it fell by the wayside once she got into the classroom. So many other things needed to be focused on before exercising self-awareness. Jackie talked about gaining self-awareness and understanding on her teaching journey instead of in her program. Lastly, Sarah did not mention if her program promoted and nurtured self-awareness through its curricula.

This perception was similar to research findings about how students miss opportunities in their coursework. Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) write, “The participants reported missed opportunities in their coursework to learn skills that would have helped them to be culturally responsive…” (p. 159). As I mentioned in chapter two, although teacher preparation programs give teachers some of the tools they need to work with students, there are still areas in some programs that need to be revisited to ensure that they support teachers in this important area of work. The participants reinforced my perception, as can be seen by the consistent theme that came up from all the participants and how they did not feel fully prepared to go into the classroom.

**Reflections on Teacher Preparation Programs**

While talking to my participants about this theme, I learned that no matter the program length or the type of program that the participants attended, none gave a solid foundation on
what they needed to succeed when working with students of color. As I listened to their stories, I heard them say that their programs were not bad; they just did not feel prepared when they left the program. This point was also proven to be true through my conversation with Sarah, the program coordinator of a teacher preparation program. I also learned that my participants felt very strongly about having staff that reflects their population of students and would begin to start the awareness of culturally responsive teaching in preparation programs. I agree with the participants because research shows that students seem to excel more when they have teachers that look like them. If we start putting this into practice while educating teachers in these programs, they will then be able to mimic what is being shown to them in their classrooms.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching and Working with Students of Color**

The chart below shows some of the responses from the participants as we talked about culturally responsive teaching and their working with students of color.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRT and Working with Students of Color</th>
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<th>CRT and Working with Students of Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Tiff</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
She felt that she related to her students.

Having a mentor would have been helpful.

Does the practice meet the needs of the students?

Best practice for who? So, it’s not best practice.

To make a true difference, it has to be greater than me.

Kindergarten teachers have students walk down the hall like prisoners.

Music to reach students.

CRT and having equitable practices is something separate.

Acceptance and being included = basic needs.

Culturally responsive teaching is one of continuous asking and learning.

Multiculturalism within the learning environment.

The text should be from the culture.

Differences should be honored.

Remove the assumptions of working students of color.

CRT encourages them to be leaders.

CRT should increase teacher awareness.

Recognizing to pay attention to the children.

Incorporating CRT is very important.

Intentionality about books and presentations.

Music was used to connect with students.

Celebrate students of color.

Unprepared White educator.

Most communities had teachers that looked like her trying to teach students of color.

She had unrealistic expectations when she started teaching students of color.

Supporting students-intentionality.

For this segment, I asked the participants about culturally responsive teaching and their experience working with students of color. Each participant had a different story on how this went for them. Jackie reflected on her teaching practices and whether those practices were best practices for her or her students. She had to question herself and whether her practices were meeting their needs. As mentioned earlier, sometimes, being caught up in doing other things, you get lost in what you should be doing in the classroom. Jackie also talked about how she used
Music as a way to help students in their learning since Music is a cultural thing with people of color.

Similarly, Tiff said she also used Music to work with her students. She also talked about how she liked introducing them to different types of Music. Throughout her experiences working with her students, Tiff said that’s when she really learned to pay more attention to her students. Tiff talked about the importance of incorporating culturally responsive teaching into teacher preparation programs, how she was very intentional about the books she put in her classroom, and how she showed up as an educator for her students. Tiff ended the conversation by saying, “Work with students of color by celebrating students of color,” and I definitely agree with her.

In contrast, Lisa talked about being an unprepared White woman who worked with students of color for her entire teaching career. She talked about how having the majority of educators not look like their students could be problematic. She also spoke about what she expected teaching to be like when she started in the classroom and her lack of meeting their needs. She mainly said that she used books to support her students in her classroom. She also invited parents into the room and did show-and-tell, but books were her primary thing. Lisa made sure she told me that she did have a coach who supported her during this time as she learned how to work with students of color. The feedback she received was constructive; however, at one point and time, it was unexpected because she didn’t realize how much she would need to change to meet her students’ needs. Lastly, Sarah shared that in her program, culturally responsive teaching means respect to her. She also said that having representation in one’s educational program encourages students to become leaders in the field because when they see people who look like them, they have an example of what they can be and do.

**Reflections on Culturally Responsive Teaching and Working with Students of Color**

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Based on this conversation with my participants, I learned that Jackie and Tiff made culturally responsive teaching their own. They took the students into their classroom and paid attention to what they knew would potentially help them learn, like using music. Jackie and Tiff understood the importance of incorporating things that students could connect with in the classroom. Nganga (2015) writes, “Culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to the academic needs of their students and respond to the sociocultural dimensions of learning through an examination of students’ realities” (p. 2). It is through this reality that we can reach students where they are. As Jackie said, the more she reflected on culturally responsive teaching, she had to think about if she was meeting the needs of her students. As mentioned, educators get so caught up in doing other things that they forget about the students in their classroom. According to Gay (2002), “too many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach ethnically diverse students” (p. 106).

Listening to Lisa helped me understand the importance of preparing any educator to work with students of color, no matter their race. Lisa understood that being a White educator working with students of color could potentially be problematic because the dynamic is different. In one of her interviews, Lisa said that although her program puts most of the people in their program, which are affluent White educators in neighborhoods with Black students, she wished they supported them in preparing better before putting them in the classroom. This claim can be backed up by Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) as they said, “The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2008) requires teacher education programs to provide experiences that allow teacher candidates to interact with diverse populations and require teacher candidates to demonstrate proficiency with diversity” (p.156). This shows that we can support educators in working with students of color if we give them the...
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

experience of being in a diverse setting while in their program. This way, educators can bring their questions, comments, and concerns to the program before being thrown out independently.

In agreement with what Sarah said, I believe that representation does matter. We may not always believe it to be accurate, but Lisa’s claim was supported by Redding (2019):

Students have the potential to benefit from assignment to a teacher of their own race to the extent to which students and teachers share similar beliefs about what it means to identify with a particular racial or ethnic group, and these beliefs are translated into higher expectations for student learning, improved teaching, and stronger relationships with students. (p. 503)

When we support educators in their programs with representation, it teaches them how to support their students in their classroom. When we acknowledge educators, educators will acknowledge their students. Not only with the staff but, like Sarah also said, supporting the curriculum with materials that people from that culture write.

Based on the stories within this theme, it appeared that the educators did their best with what they had in the classroom to support their students. Although none of their programs showed them what to do and how to do it, they figured it out by getting to know their students, their families, and their cultures, which should definitely be the start.

Self-Awareness

The chart below shows three participants' responses as we talked about their awakening and self-awareness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Awareness/Awakening - Jackie</th>
<th>Self-Awareness/Awakening - Tiff</th>
<th>Self-Awareness/Awakening - Lisa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always worked with students of color and is a person of color, so she felt like she didn’t have an awakening.</td>
<td>Room to grow and have fun. If I'm not growing, I'm dead.</td>
<td>It was easier for me at that moment. I still think that's an intentional practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing. As long as we live, we have experiences that will add to our Rolodex of situations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Reflecting process—practices, and mindsets.**

Reflects on the day of and before. Helps with constant growth.

Teachers that are resistant.

Being self-aware helps you recognize biases.

Doing what she should be doing for her people.

Is this practice meeting the needs of the students?

In order to make a true difference, it has to be greater than me, and that’s the way I see it.

Gained self-awareness and understanding through more of experience along her journey, as opposed to in her program.

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**Self-awareness is everything. I have developed a process for how I reflect.**

Has always been reflective.

Always checking self again to keep away fear to become something that I did not want to become.

Very transparent conversations during supervision.

Awakening and then re-awakening, and like it kept happening in levels. There is always more than what I perceived it to be.

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**I thought self-awareness was not as intentional as it needed to be.**

How could my bias be happening here? How could my bias impact the day?

I think it was essential because I might have some harmful teaching practices that might reflect more of me and my identity versus the kids.

Didn’t have the tools or knew how to access those tools to really get to that self-awareness that I needed.

It's hard as a white person to have like one awakening.

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The last segment we talked about was self-awareness. Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015) quote Rychly and Graves (2012) saying, “The main characteristics that teachers need to develop include caring and empathy, the ability to reflect on their beliefs about other cultures, the ability to reflect on their own culture, and knowledge about other cultures” (p. 158). Are teachers aware of themselves enough that they are not only able to reflect on their beliefs and culture but also have that same outlook on other people’s cultures?

All the teachers that participated in the study recognized the value of self-awareness of their cultures and beliefs. Jackie and Tiff said they were reflective people and were continually growing in their self-awareness and reflexive ability. Jackie said she reflects day in and out, which helps with continual professional and personal growth. Whereas Tiff said, she checks...
herself constantly because she has a fear of becoming something that she does not want to become. Her continuous self-reflecting leads to her growing; as she stated, “If I am not growing, I am dead.”

Both Jackie and Lisa talked about how self-awareness helps them recognize biases that sometimes they don’t realize they have until they look at themselves. Lisa mentioned that being a White educator to students of color, her biases could easily impact her day with her unconscious actions and behaviors towards students, no matter how much she tried to keep them from coming out.

Lastly, when I asked each participant when they experienced their awakening, they had a different response. Jackie felt she was always awakened because she was a Black woman working with students of color for her entire career. Because of this awareness, she could understand what they needed. Tiff said that she had different levels of awakening because every experience and exposure she had took her to a different level of understanding her students and their needs. Lisa said as a White person working with students of color, it was hard for her to have one awakening because she was always learning from her students. Sarah, however, did not speak on her awakening. Because she came from an administrative perspective, her responses reflected administrative responses. She talked about how teacher preparation programs should increase the level of teacher awareness that is offered. Her response referred to having more people of color teaching in teacher preparation programs, which should provide some frame of reference for students in learning self-awareness. As an administrator, I think Sarah sees the world through a different set of eyes which is what she can do to help students be prepared to go into the field, as opposed to what she experienced when preparing to become a teacher.
Reflections on Self-Awareness/Awakening

The participants opened my eyes to see the importance of self-awareness when working with students of color. They all made important points that should be considered when considering our work in education. Self-awareness keeps you growing, as they mentioned. It helps you reflect on your biases and keeps you from hopefully taking them into the classroom with you. Park, Riley, and Branch (2020) define self-awareness as “Accurately assessing one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence” (p. 185). This definition points back to what Jackie and Tiff mentioned about constantly reflecting. In order to really be aware of yourself, you have to know your strengths and weaknesses, especially when working with students. When you don’t know yourself in this capacity, how can you pay attention and understand the students and what they need? I know that self-awareness is not an easy process, but it is a process that needs to be done.

When we are thinking about how educators can create self-awareness in the classroom to help students, Baum and King (2006) write, “In order to ensure that the educational opportunities we offer our students are meaningful and relevant to their lives, it is important for teacher educators to make a sincere effort to get to know their students as individuals” (p. 220). This takes away from self-awareness just being about you as the educator but puts the focus back on the students in your classroom. I know that may be hard to do, but like Maxine Greene said, Teachers intent on awakening, must be wide-awake themselves. They must seek “truly to attend” to students. Teachers should be present with students in the moment and invest in them as individuals, with the hope of inspiring belief in their worth and possibility.

(Williams, 2017, p. 4)
To support students, educators must be open and aware of themselves. Then and only then will they be “truly attending” to the students and their needs in the educational setting. However, none of the participants said that their teacher preparation programs explicitly incorporated or taught self-awareness. Tiff noted that her program had the beginnings of teaching self-awareness through weekly journal reflections. Lisa said that although the instructors tried to give her the tools she needed to go on a self-awareness journey, it fell by the wayside once she got into the classroom. So many other things needed to be focused on before exercising self-awareness. Jackie talked about gaining self-awareness and understanding on her teaching journey as opposed to her in her program. Lastly, Sarah did not mention if her program teaches students self-awareness.

Research shows why it is vital for teacher preparation programs to include self-awareness in their curriculum. Baum and King (2006) write, “The foundation for a teacher preparation program that promotes the development of self-awareness lies in creating an environment in which students have a sense of safety and support in their efforts of self-discovery” (p. 218). It is essential for teacher preparation programs to build self-awareness in educators and within their curriculum. We can’t say we want our educators to be aware of their students, yet they don’t have any awareness of themselves and their biases. Self-awareness sometimes needs to be taught because not everyone has a strong sense of it. As I mentioned in chapter one, it wasn’t until I got into my master’s program that I understood that I had biases; by then, I was in my 20s. So, helping educators learn this throughout their program, I think, would be beneficial for them and their students. It will teach them to look at their students as people.
Research Findings

Below are the main findings that were collected from the interviews with my participants. Although there were some things that my participants had similar viewpoints on, they also were very different. Each participant gave me a good depiction of their program and how they were prepared to work with students of color. Their responses helped me hear their stories clearly, as if I had gone through it with them. Below are the main takeaways that I pulled from my participants’ stories. Based on their perceptions and experiences, I had come to the following findings about their understanding of how prepared they felt when it came to working with students of color:

- Culture has a significant influence on identity and who you are.
- Culture impacts how you interact with others.
- Culture influences how students learn.
- Knowledge of students’ cultures allows educators to know them better.
- When working with students of color, culture is important to know how to support them in the classroom.
- This study had mixed perceptions and practices about how well teacher preparation programs prepared their students.
- Cultural awareness was not taught to the participants in this study from the programs they attended that ranged between one to two years in this study.
- Teacher preparation should have culturally diverse representation in the staff.
- There are many different barriers to why educators cannot support the needs of their students.
  - Meeting top-down measurement standards.
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

- Pressure from administrators to meet the top-down standards and standardized curriculum.
- Not enough funding.

- Beginning teachers in this study did not have sufficient knowledge of Culturally Responsive Teaching.
- Beginning early childhood teachers in this study did not know enough about cultural awareness.
- Music, books, and family involvement contribute to incorporating culturally responsive classroom teaching.
- Focusing on standards led to missing students’ individual needs from the participants in this study.
- Teachers in this study learned on their own how to become more attentive to their students’ needs.
- Teachers in this study constantly checked themselves to ensure they continued to grow and not become something they did not want to become.
- A few had awakenings, while others did not feel they had an awakening.
- There was a very different experience working with students of color for the White educator as opposed to the Black educators.

**Answering the Research Questions**

I presented three research questions to guide my study. These questions were based on my desire to learn from my participants how they felt their teacher preparation program prepared them to work with students of color. I hoped that with the narrated stories offered by four participants, I would be able to answer the questions. Their answers were discovered through the
analysis, triangulations, and interpretations of the responses the participants offered in our interviews. By the nature of the narrative study methodology, I recognize that they are shaped by the early childhood educators’ subjective interpretation of the experiences and influenced by their social and cultural background.

Below are the questions and research-based answers:

(R1): What can we learn from early childhood educators about how they were prepared to work with students of color?

As I sought to answer this first question, I asked all four participants several different questions during the interview that could help me understand their level of preparation to work with students of color. From the conversations with the participants, it was apparent that their programs did not really prepare them to work with students of color. None of their coursework, except for one participant with a few classes on culturally responsive teaching, gave them the tools to support students of color.

I was shocked to hear that none of my participants felt prepared to work with students of color and that different programs were represented. But, then again, Doran's (2011) research states:

Teacher preparation programs continue to come under scrutiny, as educational reform efforts become established across the country, for the quality and rigor of their programs for preservice teachers (NCTQ, 2013). The quality of programs, and their ability to expose teachers to various perspectives, forms of diversity, and curriculum approaches, plays a significant role in the dispositions and quality of new teachers (Bischoff, French and Shaumloffel, 2014; Kidd et al., 2014). (p. 61)
My participants helped me understand this point, so well-illustrated by the authors. How can we expect educators to support different learners if teacher preparation programs do not introduce their students to diverse populations and how to service them? Additionally, Gay (2002) supports the claim of the participants not feeling prepared, “too many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach ethnically diverse students” (p. 106). Furthermore, Gay brings up a great point, “we can’t teach what we don’t know” (p. 106). We expect teachers to go straight into the classroom and pick up on what they should be doing, although the participants in this study were not taught what or how to do that, not to mention the other constraints that occur when educators enter the classroom.

Like Djonko-Moore and Traum (2015), I want to see educators taking what they have learned in their programs and using that to be reflected in the curriculum. “Teachers must be competent in the ability to see cultural diversity as an asset and use cultural knowledge to develop the curriculum” (p. 157). In my opinion, the only way they will be competent is through learning it in their programs and through the experience they receive in the classroom.

(R2): How does a program coordinator design and implement a curriculum that helps educators support the needs of students of color?

Talking with an educator who serves as an early childhood administrator gave me insight into how the curriculum is created within her program. The administrator spoke about implementing the cultural learning standards in each of her course outlines and syllabi. She then looks at the learning objectives and designs the curriculum around that. She also discussed that one of the textbooks she uses focuses on the awareness of multicultural classroom environments while creating culturally sensitive teaching strategies. In addition, she talked about the role of the
administrator in ensuring that through the syllabus, the day-to-day teaching is reflective of cultural practices.

Based on the administrative perspective about implementing the curriculum, she feels that her program does support working with students of color. From my understanding of what my participants said, although different, the curriculum in their programs did not help them support students of color based on their experience. Since I had two different sets of eyes looking at the curriculum in their programs, that’s where we see the gap in education. Because the administrator sees it as she is making strides to incorporate it into her program, she feels that her curriculum supports culturally responsive teaching. In contrast, the educator participants saw it from a different lens of not feeling prepared or supported by the curriculum because once they got into the classroom after leaving their program, they did not have all the tools they needed to work with students of color.

Talking to the administrator helped me realize that she is not the only program just now starting to get on board with implementing culturally responsive teaching into their curriculum. However, although the participants were not explicitly taught this in their programs, a few began implementing it independently in their classrooms by bringing in different books and Music for their students. Some participants also took the time to get to know their students and their families and allowed them to bring items into the classroom that were important to them so that they could be a part of their world. Of course, it takes more than this, but this was a good start for teachers who were not taught how to support students of color in their program. Strickland-Dixon (2011) tells us, “The current curriculum does not address the cultural needs of the new generation of culturally rich African American students” (p. 114). This assertion is evident as the teachers had to figure out ways to incorporate their ideas into the curriculum. I am not saying
that teachers should not be creative, but if it were a part of the curriculum already, teachers
would not be so lost in figuring out how to meet their students where they are, as the participants
stated that they had to learn how to do it.

In addition to the interview with the program administrator, I also reviewed the
documentation from her program. From what I saw through the review and talked to her about,
none of the courses within the curriculum that I looked at seemed to explicitly offer culturally
responsive teaching in them, nor did they address the needs of the students of color.

The early childhood administrator’s interview showed that she does not have a huge role
in planning the curriculum but rather more so in changing the materials needed for the course.
However, Offorma (2016) states, “Curriculum planning should therefore endeavor to integrate
the components of culture, which is the essence of education in curriculum planning to ensure
that the products of the educational system would be functional members of their society” (p. 1).
This shows that in curriculum planning, programs should consider some form of culture in their
coursework. This is what makes the educational system functional for our students. Like we want
our students in the classroom to have these different learning cultural experiences, we have to
provide those same types of experiences in teacher preparation programs that are culturally
oriented and culturally based on the coursework. The problem is that we can’t expect teachers to
know how to make a culturally sensitive learning environment for their students when they have
had educational experiences that did not do it for them. I think a lot of times, educators mimic
what they see and know; if they did not see it or did not have exposure to it, they cannot copy it.

(R3): Are educators taught self-awareness that will help them be aware of their students and
their cultures?
Based on talking with my participants, some of them spoke of having some sort of beginning components of self-awareness through either journaling or conversations with their coach. However, through those limited experiences, self-awareness was not something that was explicitly taught throughout their programs. Most of them learned through reflection or conversations with other colleagues in the classroom.

Self-awareness and awakening are essential when it comes to culturally responsive teaching. Maxine Greene’s work discusses what this term means.

Wide-awareness is defined as a heightened sense of consciousness, encouraging critical awareness and deep engagement with one’s world. As individuals come alive in this way, their open-minded exploration is fueled by their development of personal agency and self-worth through their pursuit of presentness and possibility. (Williams, 2017, p. 1)

Wide-awareness is a form of self-awareness because for educators to be self-aware, they have to be able to engage in and have a sense of consciousness when it comes to their world. This means they must be aware of what is happening within them to explore what is happening with others around them. The participants did this by journaling and being reflective practitioners daily while working with their students. Although it was not explicitly taught in their program, they knew that to meet their student’s needs, they had to reflect on their biases and experiences daily.

The other important point that research suggests when it comes to self-awareness is that educators can use their self-awareness to make good classroom decisions.

The foundation of good decision-making lies in helping preservice teachers develop a sense of self-awareness. This sense involves, in part, helping preservice teachers develop an ability to examine and identify the personal characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes that
make them who they are and influence the way they think about teaching and learning, thus influencing their decision-making process. (Baum and King, 2006, p. 217)

If educators become aware of their sometimes hidden biases and how they may impact their teaching, it could change how they think and act. Whether people believe it or not, self-awareness and awakening play an essential role in education. This self-awareness is the beginning when it comes to educating students. As heard during the interviews with my participants, self-awareness was rarely included in their coursework. But because I had participants that understood and valued the concept of self-awareness, they figured out ways to make it happen in their program and classrooms.

As African American educators, they found that self-awareness was important to ensure they did not become someone they did not recognize through their behaviors and actions. Self-awareness kept them on top of daily inner reflections. Reflection helped them change their mindset and to be open when dealing with different students. This self-awareness also helped them look at their classroom practices and ask, “Is this practice meeting the needs of my students?” Through this self-awareness and reflection, they also realized that “to make a difference, it has to be greater than me.” The last thing that my African American educators realized is that self-awareness is everything! If you are not self-aware, you are not growing professionally and emotionally.

As for the White educator, self-awareness and awakening were not the easiest concepts to deal with. Coming into the classroom, Lisa’s experiences were totally different than she expected, which made her return to the drawing board to see how she could change things. She began having conversations with mentors and other colleagues that were very helpful to her growth when working with students of color. Of course, some of the conversations were
difficult, but she knew they were what she needed if she planned on continuing her career
teaching students of a different race and culture than her own. Lisa knew that as a White woman,
having continual awakens was something that needed to be done, especially because she worked
with students of color. Daily, she had to readjust her thinking on how she taught and managed
meaningful learning experiences for her students.

Overall, it seems that self-awareness should be a course of its own because this theme has
so many complexities. I think that educators should have a course or two that support self-
awareness. As I mentioned before, it wasn’t until I studied in a graduate program that I
understood what self-awareness meant and how important it was to the children and families I
would serve. When teachers are aware of themselves, they can then be aware of the needs of
their students by helping them feel seen, heard, and valued in the classroom, which will boost
their confidence academically, socially, and emotionally.

Validity & Trustworthiness

Leavy (2017) states, “Validity or trustworthiness speaks to the quality of the research
project, the rigor of the methodology, and whether readers of the research findings feel you have
established trustworthiness” (p. 154-155). During this process, I took the advice of Ravitch and
Carl (2020) as I began asking myself several questions, “How can I get the most contextualized
and complicated picture possible of this group, context, and/or phenomenon?” and “How do I
collect data in such a way as to excavate a range of opinions, experiences, and perspectives?” (p.
93). I wanted to ensure that I used the proper method, asked the right questions, and had good,
reliable data that would be trustworthy, along with valid answers to my research questions.

As Ravitch and Carl (2020) asserted, I wanted to ensure that my findings were faithful to
participants’ experiences, which is why I chose a narrative research approach. I wanted my
research to be genuine and to capture the stories of others and present their perspectives and the meanings they make of them honestly, thoroughly, and authentically. Having the participants tell their own stories “Demonstrates a fidelity to participants’ experiences rather than specific methods” (p. 167). I could see my research topic through six sets of eyes, including my four participants, myself, and the literature on this topic. Through this, I was able to have multiple in-depth perspectives and hear their viewpoints. As Creswell and Poth (2018) said, validation helps the researcher “strive for “understanding, that deep structure of knowledge that comes from visiting personally with participants, spending extensive time in the field, and probing to obtain detailed meanings” (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 253).

A qualitative study does not intend to give a complete and universal answer to the research problem. Instead, it allows us to dig deeper into the issues involved in the study and reach trustworthy findings.

Essentially, validation of one’s research may help the researcher figure out if they are progressing toward a deeper understanding of the topic through the eyes of practitioners. This knowledge and insights may lead to change and improving the situation that the research was focused on.

Creswell and Poth (2018) talk about several different methods to take into account when it comes to validation criteria. The methods I used in this study are listed below:

- **Triangulation** – a method that builds on comparing and contrasting “Multiple sources of data to examine an assertion” (Leavy, 2017).
  
  - I used interviews to gather data from multiple people at different times and places in this study. This triangulation helped me see if the data that I collected were credible, good enough to use, and whether it contradicted or confirmed other
understandings. Do other participants’ perspectives give a new perspective on what was seen and understood? Did I need to do something different while getting perspectives from different people as well as analyzing and interpreting the data?

- I didn’t only speak with educators but also talked to a program coordinator of an early childhood teacher preparation program.
- I also triangulated my findings with the literature and interpreted by claims and explanations compared to researchers in the field.

- **Reflexivity** – I used the process that allowed me to “be aware of, monitor, and address (when needed) throughout my work as I addressed [my] role as a researcher in the entire research process and in particular when… collecting data” (Ravitch & Carl, 2020, p. 107).

- **Rich and thick descriptions** “Refers to giving a thorough account of the participants’ views, intents, circumstances, motives, meanings, and understandings” (Younas et al., 2023, p. 1).

  - This method was used as I wrote up the data analysis in Chapter four. For the most part, I left the words of the participants as they responded and reflected on essential aspects of the issues investigated. I used extensive quotations because I wanted the readers to authentically hear the participants' emotions and voices through the data. I wanted the readers to get to know and understand each participant in the context of their background and to hear the meaning they attached to their experience in the rawest form.
I quoted my participants directly throughout the study. This method left less room for me to interpret the data as I thought, but instead, it was taken from each participant’s mouth.

- **Contextualizing the Findings within a Theoretical Framework**
  
  - The findings were filtered through the theoretical framework of culturally responsive teaching since my research looked at how prepared educators are to work with students of color.

  
  - I outlined the analysis and interpretation processes and reported my methods in detail. I described the themes and patterns I have identified and used tables to illustrate how I analyzed them. The detailed reporting intended to demonstrate that these strategies led to trustworthy findings.

All of these components were important to help me and my study. These were some of the main principles I used to ensure that my research produced reliable information based on the data I collected.

**Researcher Subjectivity**

As a researcher, I was professionally and personally involved in this issue at the center of the study. From the start of the study, I came into it feeling as though I had and knew the answers to the problem. The idea for this study came not only from me teaching early childhood courses at a Community College but it also stemmed from my work as a classroom observer. These experiences showed me that we had not adequately prepared educators to work with students of color based on what I heard and saw.
Throughout this study, some issues of researcher subjectivity came into the process. I had to be careful of the topic overall. I chose this topic because I already thought a certain way about it and had specific responses that I was looking for the participants to give me when I went in, if I’m honest. It is almost like I had everything planned out in my mind. So, as I went back through, read, and listened to the interviews, I first tried to find the things I felt I only needed to prove my point without telling their stories. But the more I talked to my dissertation Chair and thought about how I would help others understand what I am trying to do if I did not tell the whole story. So, once I changed the way I thought about it and began looking at the bigger picture of my research, the lens I was using to filter the data changed as well.

Lastly, as I wrote the participant's responses in the analysis and interpretation, I tried my best to keep the focus on what they spoke about during the interview process. Trying to keep the participants’ quotes as close to accurate while writing them out was sometimes hard because I wanted to keep the rawness of what they spoke, but I also wanted the readers to understand what they talked about. As I wrote out the narratives and quotes of the participants, I had to be highly self-aware and reflexive not to get triggered as I relistened and wrote out the responses. I must say that it is easy to take someone else’s story and try to relive your story through theirs, and I had to remind myself constantly that it was not my story to tell.

**Practical Implications**

While traveling through the research journey, I recognized that we could better prepare our educators to work with students of color. Yes, I know that my Midwest big state now has Learning Standards that reflect Culturally Responsive Teaching that programs are starting to implement. However, based on my completed interviews, I found that several educators are still
out in the field who did not receive this training. So, what does my research mean for teachers, teacher preparation programs, and administrators?

**Teachers**

The findings suggest that we need to be able to support them both in our programs and the classroom. Some of the things my participants talked about that they wished would have been helpful was having mentors while in the program and after to walk them through their classroom experience. Others wished they had a longer length of time in their program. Someone else wished they had an opportunity for student teaching instead of on-the-job training and being thrown right into the classroom.

Practically, teachers should incorporate culturally responsive teaching into their current classroom practices. This implementation could be done in several ways, including getting to know the students personally in your classroom, focusing the curriculum and instruction around the needs of the students in your classroom, and allowing them to have a voice within the classroom setting. Teachers can also engage in daily and weekly self-reflection. Keeping a journal of what went well and what did not go well could help see the things that need to be changed moving forward.

**Teacher Preparation Programs**

The findings also suggested that teacher preparation programs should have professors that look like their students because that is where culturally responsive teaching begins. The participants felt that we should model in teacher preparation programs what we expect educators to do in their classrooms. This includes listening, being aware of their needs, understanding their students and what they need to thrive in the program, and finding ways to support their learning. It is also suggested that the curriculum we have in teacher preparation programs should also tell
the stories of people of color who impacted education. Lastly, it was recommended that they should also have more extended programs for those that go through alternative licensure programs.

Teacher preparation programs should teach educators how to become reflective and self-aware. This can be done by creating a self-awareness/biases course that helps educators reflect on who they are, or it can be done by adding a self-reflection topic within each course that the program offers. This way, educators will know how to reflect from the first to the last class. Using this will teach educators how to think beyond the surface and use the same techniques they learn in their program in the classroom with their students.

I realize that putting this on teacher preparation programs is a big responsibility and does not always fall directly on them. However, when it comes to how we prepare educators, teacher preparation programs play a significant role in that and should ensure that no matter the population their students work with, they are ready to support them.

**Administration**

Schools should develop a strong mentorship program for first-year teachers in the classroom to be intentional and help new teachers navigate the hardships of learning their role as a teacher while also trying to meet deadlines and students’ needs. Administrators should also take some time to talk to teachers to see how they can support them in the classroom or by conducting classroom observations that could help support teachers as they work with students of color.

Practically, administrators can offer their teachers professional development that focuses on supporting students with different cultural backgrounds. These offerings could include how to become sensitive to students that don’t look, act, or think like you and how teachers can integrate
culturally responsive teaching into their current curriculum. Administrators could also start a mentor support program that helps teachers collaborate and share ideas on supporting the students in their classroom. They can also revisit and/or release some of the pressures that teachers daily have, which keep them from responding to students the way they should.

**Study Limitations and Future Research Possibilities**

This study contained several limitations, and they are listed below.

- Number of participants, which, of course, does not represent every teacher preparation program.
- I could have gotten more accurate data had I used participants that just completed teacher preparation programs within the past year.
- I could have adjusted the question for the program administrator to get a more precise response on what I was looking for pertaining to this study.

Because of these limitations, I sometimes feel that my research questions were not answered as thoroughly as I had hoped. Although I received some great data through the interviews, I wish I would have asked more follow-up questions to clarify some of the responses. I think I would have had richer data to answer my questions.

In the future, I would like to continue exploring this topic. In my future study, I would change the participants’ pool to recent graduates of teacher preparation programs within the last three years to see how their experience has changed from my current participants. I also would interview a more mixed population of participants regarding race and age. I would also add some observations of educators working with students of color to get a good look at what is being done in the classroom. In addition to the above, I would also reconstruct my research questions. When I originally wrote my questions, I did not fully understand the importance of my research
questions, so I wanted to change them once I started researching. I think at the point where I am now, I have a better understanding of the research process overall and would definitely revise, if not change them all. Lastly, I would possibly use a case-study approach to follow students through their coursework and into their first year of teaching to see if what they learned in their program would support the students they were working with.

**Reflections on The Research Journey**

WOW, is all I can say. This journey has been filled with many emotions from the time I started the program in September 2019 until the end, Winter 2023. I remember always coming in knowing what I wanted to write about; I just didn’t know how I was going to do it. I thought I had it together through all the coursework and writing until I got to the research part. When I’ve talked to people who have done their doctorate dissertation research before, they often would say that once you complete the coursework, it gets better because you will be working on your topic of interest. However, I beg to differ. Writing my dissertation research has been one of the most challenging things I have ever done. Although rewarding, it has been challenging.

Becoming a researcher has grown me more professionally and scholarly in many ways than I could have imagined. I never thought of myself as a researcher and surely didn’t think I could do this, but completing this research has shown me I actually enjoy researching. Overall, it was challenging because it stretched me to think in a way I wasn’t quite used to. It caused me to think outside of the box and be creative during the process. I didn’t want to do research just to be doing research, so I had to think of ways that it could benefit early childhood educators in the future.

During this past year of writing my dissertation, tears have flowed several times because I did not feel I knew where I was going. I was struggling because although I knew what I wanted
to research, I didn’t know how I was going to do it. To this day, I still feel like I could’ve done way better and could do everything over. I put a lot of time and energy into my research, but a part of me still feels like something is missing; I just can’t put a finger on it. In the middle of my research, I emailed my Chair asking if I could change my topic and research questions because after completing some of the interviews, there were some things I did not think about and would’ve preferred to discuss. But as my Chair said and my seminar professor told me in our group during our last seminar, that’s sometimes how it goes. I just wanted to throw the whole dissertation away and start over. However, they helped me understand that this is not a perfect process.

Despite the challenges during this research, there were some delightful parts. I enjoyed talking to others about their experiences and connecting with them through their stories. I enjoyed reading through the transcripts and comparing the similarities and differences between all four participants. Though it took a lot of time, I enjoyed writing up the narratives for each participant and being able to tell their stories the way they related them.

Although this process was challenging, it impacted my life personally and professionally more than I anticipated. I knew things would change a little, but I was not expecting things to change as much as they did. For example, there were many sleepless nights when I stayed up to complete assignments and meet deadlines. It was to the point where I had to begin to put boundaries on myself for when I needed to stop working so that I would not overwhelm myself. I did this for the first couple of years and then realized that if I were not getting the sleep I needed to be a functional adult, I would not be good for myself, let alone writing a dissertation and work. Throughout the process, I had to say no to many things, including ministry and social events. Because I am an introvert, saying no to things was not hard. However, it became hard,
especially during the summer and holiday months when my friends and family wanted to hang out. It was especially hard for me mentally because my brain was just exhausted from all the reading and writing I had to do daily. After this program, I don’t want to look at another book, article, or anything that pertains to research for a while. I have been saying this for the past few years, and I still stick to this to this day after writing my dissertation.

Professionally, it increased my writing skills which I do a lot of at my job when having to write reports. It has also changed how I think, engage in conversations, and interact with people. It has given me the patience and confidence I needed to present and train my staff, and it has helped me see things from several different viewpoints, not just my own. My teaching career has made me think of ways to become more aware when teaching my students and the various ways to incorporate self-awareness and culturally responsive teaching in my courses.

Lastly, I just enjoyed the process overall. It has taught me so much about myself, including that I can accomplish even the hard things I set my mind to. Many days, I did not think I would see this day or that I was even smart enough to be in the program. Still, now that I am here, I proved to myself that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). I also learned that although some goals seem farther away than others, you will eventually get there in your own time. I had to learn not to try to keep up with everyone else and to give myself grace if I missed a deadline or if I was not where I wanted to be in this process. I told myself that even the smallest things I did were still progress in the right direction, even if it did not feel like it. Even when I wanted to give up, I kept reminding myself I was almost there. It was also helpful that I had parents and friends that reminded me of my goals when I felt defeated or discouraged through the process. Having people in your corner cheering for you makes a big difference in your success when you do not have it in you to cheer for
yourself. Although I took the three-year track because I wanted to be finished quicker, I can’t say that I would recommend that if you have a busy life because it can be overwhelming. But, like me, if you know you have a goal in mind that you are trying to reach, it is doable, and I am here as a testimony of that. The one thing that I will say that carried me through this entire process was God and my faith and constantly reminding myself that I was ordained to be here, which was all a part of God’s plan for my life. The more I remembered His plan, the more I could keep going because I knew I had a bright future.

Now, if you asked me if I’d do it again, I’m not sure I would do it all over again because this was a lot of hard work. No one can prepare you for this experience because everyone has a different experience. This process was isolating regarding friends because people who are not in a doctoral program or have not experienced this kind of program do not understand the time, commitment, and tiredness during the process. I often tell people that at this level, you have to know that this is something you want to invest in because a lot of energy and attention needs to go into this. You have to stay focused and not get distracted as you are on this journey because if not, it will take forever to finish. Finally, if I had to give one piece of advice to anyone who is thinking about taking on this experience, I would say to trust the process even when you cannot see the end of the road, and I’m thankful to God that I stayed in it, even when I wanted to quit.
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References


The Education Trust- https://edtrust.org/early-childhood-tool/


Appendix A - Interview Guide (Program Coordinator)

1.) Tell me about yourself.
   a. What made you want to become a teacher?
   b. What motivated you to get into ECE?

2.) Tell me about your family.

3.) Tell me about your experience with young children.

4.) Tell me about your education.
   a. What was your experience in the program?
   b. What was your school?
   c. How did you decide to major in ECE?
   d. How were your relationships with peers and teachers?

5.) Tell me about your current work.
   a. Where do you work?
   b. Describe the setting
      i. the feeling
      ii. the environment
      iii. relationships with parents
      iv. relationships with administrators
      v. relationships with coworkers
   c. What is your role?
      i. Could you walk me through your day-to-day role?
      1. Responsibilities, interactions

6.) Tell me about the curriculum in your program.
   a. Who creates the curriculum, or who decides what goes into the curriculum?

7.) How is the curriculum created for the courses in ECE?

8.) Give me an example of the process of creating one specific course.

9.) Describe the theoretical underlining perception that is at the basis of the course.

10.) What are the practical aspects of the course? Can you give specific examples?

11.) How is the student’s success assessed in the program? Examples?
    a. Meaning, how do you all know they are ready to enter the field?
    b. When you see that they are not ready or need more support, what happens next?

12.) In your eyes, what is culturally responsive teaching, and how should it be expressed in a class? Give me an example.

13.) How does the curriculum support culturally responsive teaching? Give example
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14.) Why do you think that it should be included in the curriculum?
   a. What happens if it’s not?

15.) What are some benefits of increasing how teachers work with students of color or culturally responsive teaching in the classroom? Can you please share specific examples to demonstrate your position?

16.) Do you think we should increase teacher awareness (maybe acceptance) of the role of culture in the classroom? Give an example. How can we do this?

17.) Does the current curriculum in your program support teaching students with color? In what ways? Please give examples.

18.) In your ideal world, how would schools act as a place at which culture is respected and celebrated?

Appendix A- Interview Guide (ECE Educators)

1.) Tell me about yourself.
   a. What made you want to become a teacher?
   b. What motivated you to get into ECE?

2.) Tell me about your family.

3.) Tell me about your experience with young children.

4.) Tell me about your education.
   a. What was your experience in the program?
   b. What was your school?
   c. How did you decide to major in ECE?
   d. How were your relationships with peers and teachers?

5.) Tell me about your current work.
   d. Where do you work?
   e. Describe the setting
      i. the feeling
      ii. the environment
      iii. relationships with parents
      iv. relationships with administrators
     v. relationships with coworkers
   f. What is your role?
      i. Could you walk me through your day-to-day role?
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1. Responsibilities, interactions

6.) Describe your experience in your teacher preparation program.
   a. What classes did you take?
   b. Did you feel supported?
   c. Did you attend a two-year or four-year institution?

7.) Do you feel that your program prepared you to work with students of color? Explain.

8.) Did any of your classes reflect culturally responsive teaching or self-awareness?
   a. If so, which one? Tell me about it.
   b. How much is used in your current work? Please provide an example.

9.) Where do you feel your program lacked or excelled when preparing you to work with students of color? Can you give me an example(s) to demonstrate that?

10.) Tell me about your experience when you first began working with students of color. Could you give me an incident and explain?
   a. Was it what you expected? Explain.

11.) What are some things you wish you had learned in your teacher preparation program to prepare you for working with students of color? Explain.

12.) Do you think self-awareness is important? Why?

13.) From your perspective, do you feel that your program taught the importance of self-awareness and understanding who you are? Explain.
   a. How does learning this benefit your work with students of color?

14.) Were you taught to understand a student’s culture in order to support their learning? Explain.

15.) How important is it for preparation programs to begin including culturally responsive teaching in their courses? Why or why not?

16.) How do you support students of color in the classroom?
   a. Books, community, voice, encourage, support, cherish backgrounds
   b. Parents
   c. Violence

17.) Do you think that the current curriculum in teacher preparation programs supports preparing educators to work with students of color? Why or why not?

18.) What would you add or change in the program to improve cultural teacher awareness and support their work with students of color?
Appendix B- Informed Consent Observation Interview

Dear prospective participant:

My name is Ja’Re Thorn, and I am a doctoral student at National Louis University. I am asking you to participate in this study, “Culturally Responsive Teaching in Teacher Preparation Programs: How Do Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs Prepare Teachers to Work with Students of Color”, occurring in October, 2022. The purpose of the study is to look at whether or not teacher preparation programs curriculum supports educators in learning how to work with students of color. This study will help researchers develop a deeper understanding of what is needed to support educators while working with students of color in the classroom setting, while also making sure that students of color academic needs are being met. This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

By signing below, you are providing consent to participate in a research project conducted by Ja’Re Thorn, doctoral student, at National Louis University, Chicago.

Please understand that the purpose of the study is to understand teacher preparation programs and culturally responsive teaching and not to judge you or your experiences. Participation in this study will include:

- 2 individual interviews scheduled at your convenience in October 2022.
  - Interviews will last up to 2 hours and include approximately 16 questions to understand your experience as an early childhood educator working with students of color and your experience in your teacher preparation program.
  - Interviews will be recorded and participants may view and have final approval on the content of interview transcripts.
- 1 one-hour review of artifacts and documentation related to the teacher preparation program.

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences, and employed to inform teaching practices, but participants’ identities will in no way be revealed (data will be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants). To ensure confidentiality the researcher will secure recordings, transcripts, and field notes in a locked cabinet in her home office. Only the dissertation committee will have access to data.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to support teacher preparation programs and other schools and school districts looking to refine curriculum using culturally responsive teaching.

Upon request you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. Please email the researcher, Ja’Re Thorn at jthorn@my.nl.edu to request results from this study.
In the event that you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Ja’Re Thorn, [redacted], [redacted].

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that has not been addressed by the researcher, you may contact the researcher’s chair, Sara Efrat Efron at sefron@nl.edu, the co-chairs of NLU’s Institutional Research Board: Dr. Shaunti Knauth; email: Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu; phone: (312) 261-3526; or Dr. Kathleen Cornett; email: kcornett@nl.edu; phone: (844) 380-5001. Co-chairs are located at National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Thank you for your consideration.

Consent: I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in the study Culturally Responsive Teaching in Teacher Preparation Programs. My participation will consist of the activities below during October:

- 2 Interviews lasting approximately 1-2 hours each
- 1 one-hour review of artifacts and documentation from teacher preparation program

_________________________________________  __________________________
Participant’s Signature                             Date

_________________________________________  __________________________
Researcher’s Signature                             Date