

May 2021

Overcoming the Void: Obstacles to Authentic Culturally Relevant Teaching

Lindsay Rowe
Dominican University of California

<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2021.EDU.03>

IRB Number: 10919

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Rowe, Lindsay, "Overcoming the Void: Obstacles to Authentic Culturally Relevant Teaching" (2021). *Master of Science in Education | Master's Theses*. 38.
<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2021.EDU.03>

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts and Education | Graduate Student Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Science in Education | Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact michael.pujals@dominican.edu.



This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

Lindsay Rowe
Candidate

Jennifer Lucko, PhD
Program Chair

Jennifer Lucko, PhD
First Reader

Katherine Lewis, PhD
Second Reader

Overcoming the Void: Obstacles to Authentic Culturally Relevant Teaching

By

Lindsay Rowe

A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science of Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2021

Copyright © Lindsay Rowe 2021. All Rights Reserved

Abstract

This study explored how teacher perceptions of professional development (PD) on culturally relevant teaching (CRT) and a lack of student voice impede authentic implementation of CRT. Culturally relevant teaching involves utilizing student backgrounds and voices to shape curriculum and pedagogy. However, a review of the literature revealed that student voice is largely missing in CRT research. Additionally, teacher responses to PD were not frequently discussed in studies exploring implementation of CRT. The purpose of the study was to better understand student desires for education and teacher responses to PD on CRT. Research was conducted at a 7-12 public school in Northern California. Four teachers and three students were interviewed, and two students participated in a focus group. After analysis through coding, narrative analyses, and analytic memos, the findings suggested there was a void between teacher's understanding of CRT and student desires for what CRT should include in the classroom. While students and teachers had similar understandings of the meaning of CRT, students desired more representationally diverse academic content and recurrent lessons on social emotional learning. An additional void in communication appeared to exist between teachers and administration regarding the perceived effectiveness of the mandatory school-wide CRT training. Two teachers had negative reactions to the PD and did not feel comfortable sharing their frustrations with administration. Overall, findings suggest that schools should create more explicit avenues for students to share their desires and feedback with staff. Additionally, training on CRT should take place through bottom-up PD rather than a top-down approach.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my grandma for keeping me sane at each approaching deadline. Thank you for spending several hours with me on the phone, calming me down, and giving me the strength to keep persevering. Thank you to Jennifer Lucko and Katie Lewis for reading my rambling first drafts and providing me with detailed feedback. Your insights have been invaluable to my research and my writing. To my colleagues, I want to thank you for supporting me and making my first year as a teacher as enjoyable as your first year of teaching can be! To my parents, thank you for your unwavering support and letting me come home on the weekends to recharge. Thank you to my friends, Emma, Rachel, and Lindsay for keeping me sane and checking in on me frequently—your support has been deeply appreciated. Finally, to my students and future students, I would like to dedicate this work to you. I hope that we can work together to continue highlighting student voice in education!

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Tables	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of Purpose	2
Overview of the Research Design	3
Significance of the Study.....	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review	8
Education as a Means of Fighting Inequity	9
Culturally Relevant Teaching and Benefits to Student Learning	13
Obstacles to Culturally Relevant Teaching	16
Conclusion	23
Chapter 3: Methods	25
Description and Rationale for Research Approach	25
Research Design	28
Data Analysis.....	32
Validity	34
Chapter 4: Findings	37
Student Desires and Perceptions of Their Educational Experience.....	38
Teacher Definitions and Understandings of Culturally Relevant Teaching.....	44
Teacher Criticisms of CRT Professional Development Training.....	51
Conclusion	58
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	60
Implications for the Literature	61

Implications for Practice and Policy.....	63
Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research.....	65
Conclusion.....	67
References.....	69
Appendix A: Student Interview Questions.....	73
Appendix B: Teacher Interview Questions.....	75
Appendix C: Table 1 Student Demographics and Pseudonyms.....	77

List of Tables

Table 1 Student demographics and pseudonyms	78
---	----

Chapter 1: Introduction

How often are students allowed to share their unfiltered truth with educators? How often do teachers ask students for feedback on a lesson or on their teaching? How often are students asked what they want to gain from their educational experience or what could make it better? In my junior year of high school, one of my teachers asked us to fill out a form evaluating his class at the end of the year. On the last week of school, we sat in a Socratic circle and he told us to discuss each question on the form. We talked about our favorite lessons, our most challenging moments, and improvements we thought should be made for next year's juniors. My teacher took notes on our suggestions, challenging us on some of them, but for the most part, encouraged a healthy discussion. Most importantly, he made us feel like our voices and our opinions mattered to him. I knew from that moment on, that when I had a classroom of my own, I would do my best to make my own students feel the same.

The summer before beginning my master's program, I read Christopher Emdin's book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood*. In the book, Emdin discusses the idea of a "cogen"—a cogenerative (collaborative) dialogue between a small group of students in which they discuss changes they wish to see in the classroom (Emdin, 2016). Emdin speaks on the idea of frequently allowing students to become the teachers and teachers to become the students. He shares an example from one of his classes in which students were tasked with coming up with a math lesson. Briefly, he gave students a lesson on the basics of the topic, before setting them loose to create their own. While students presented their lessons, he and other students gave feedback to make the lesson better. Not only did students truly enjoy this assignment, but many of them felt confident in their understanding of the material.

After finishing this book, I immediately realized that I wanted to do my master's research on student voice and culturally relevant teaching. I thought back to the teacher I had junior year and how he was the only teacher to ever ask students for feedback. I wondered why more teachers didn't do this and why we didn't discuss the importance of student voice more in my credential program. It became clear to me that more needed to be done, because maybe, just maybe, the goal to solving the problems in education would be to listen to the group that have the most at stake in education: the students.

Statement of Purpose

In broad terms, culturally relevant teaching (CRT) occurs when teachers use student backgrounds and interests to inform curriculum and pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). CRT also involves building relationships with students and creating safe spaces where students feel relaxed enough to engage in learning. Various studies have concluded the efficacy of culturally relevant teaching in increasing student engagement and academic achievement (Hammond, 2014; Sirrakos & Fraser, 2016). Ideas related to CRT appear in the works of Pablo Freire (2018) and bell hooks (1994) who write about the "banking system" of education and the tendency for teachers to teach students *what* to think, rather than teaching them *how* to think. The standardization and globalization of education has made it even harder for true CRT to take place by creating educational standards based solely on preparing students for the workplace rather than teaching them how to be civically engaged members of society (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2020).

One of the obstacles that this study explored was the lack of student voice in the existing research. Student voice is different from clubs, student leadership, or student government. This concept also differs from simply allowing students to voice their opinions on the topics they are

learning about in class. True student voice in education allows students to have a say in classroom practices and the content they are learning. Unfortunately, studies investigating CRT that included student focus groups or student interviews investigating CRT (or simply student desires in general) are rare. The lack of research on this topic makes this particular obstacle to CRT less visible and therefore less likely to be overcome.

Another obstacle to CRT implementation explored in this study is teacher perception of CRT professional development (PD) training. In order to investigate this idea further, the following research questions were considered: How effective do teachers think their PD training is? What would they change about the training? How do white teachers specifically, feel about CRT training? It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether the views of white teachers differ from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) teachers on CRT training, but the role of a white identity in shaping teacher perceptions is discussed. The current study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do student ideas about education compare to teacher understandings of culturally relevant teaching?
2. How do teachers perceive professional development training on culturally relevant teaching?
 - a. How might a white identity influence how teachers perceive CRT training?

Overview of the Research Design

A qualitative research design was utilized to more accurately capture the desires and experiences of both students and teachers. The focus group and interviews were conducted at a small 7-12 public school in Northern California with about 600 students total. The school is located in a middle-class suburban neighborhood, but over half of students are

socioeconomically disadvantaged (California Department of Education, 2017). Full-time teachers teach six class periods and have an average of 165 students on their roster. Class sizes can range from 16 to 35 students depending on the grade level.

In order to recruit students for this study, I posted an announcement on Google Classroom in all six of my history classes. The announcement included a permission slip for students and parents to view and fill out if they were interested. Teachers were invited to participate via an email to all staff members. Four teachers and three students (two eighth graders and one tenth grader) were interviewed. Two tenth grade students participated in a focus group. The focus group and all interviews were conducted over Zoom due to the covid-19 pandemic. Student interviews lasted less than 20 minutes on average, while teacher interviews spanned from 30 minutes to over an hour. The student focus group lasted about 30 minutes and differed from the interviews because students were encouraged to bounce ideas off of each other and bring up topics not included in the interview questions. Three of the teacher participants were white. In the student population, three students were white, one was African American, and one was Latina. Student interview questions aimed to ask students about their educational experiences and changes they wished to see in terms of content, pedagogy, or the education system in general. Interview questions for teachers asked about their experience with CRT, challenges with teaching, and perceptions of the ongoing training on CRT.

Following data collection, the focus group and all interview recordings from Zoom were transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed using both open and closed coding. I worked with peers to create a concept map from which to determine my categories and eventually codes to use for the closed coding process. Some of the codes used in the coding process were student voice, SEL, white fragility, emotions, the “void”, and CRT. At the close of each coding session, I

wrote a narrative analysis reflecting on the significance of each piece of data. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I kept a journal of analytic memos reflecting on the meaning and possible significance of the data.

My positionality in this study may have affected the way that I asked my participants questions. I teach at the school site where I conducted the research so the teachers I interviewed were my colleagues and the students I interviewed were my own students. Knowing that I would continue to work with both students and teachers for the rest of the school year, I took extra precautions to not come off as offensive or invasive in any way. Being a first-year teacher also impacted the questions that I chose to ask because I was very aware of making a good impression on my colleagues. Students and teachers may have altered their answers to my questions in order to fit what they thought I would want to hear and provide helpful information in my study.

Significance of the Study

After comparing data gathered from students and teachers, a gap between student desires and teacher ideas about CRT was highlighted. While both groups acknowledged the importance of relationship building in CRT, students discussed the need for social emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom and more diverse curriculum in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. In contrast, teachers spoke solely about relationship-building.

In addition, the findings indicate that some teachers at the school were highly critical of the CRT training required by the district. All teachers shared that while they were onboard with the idea of CRT, they wished to see more specific examples of how to properly implement CRT in the training. Additionally, two white teachers shared that they did not feel comfortable

speaking up or giving feedback about the PD for fear of being stereotyped due to their white identity.

The findings indicate that what students want in their education is only being partially met by teachers. In order to make their CRT more authentic, teachers need to ask for student feedback. Unlike previous research, this study asks teachers to give their feedback on CRT teacher training and suggestions for improvement. This study adds to the small body of research that explores teacher reactions to CRT and/or social justice education. The findings suggest there is a need for further research into whether white teachers' perspectives on CRT differ than BIPOC teacher perspectives.

In order to make CRT effective and empowering for students, student voices need to be heard. The goal of this study was to tap into student voice and use their words to help educators improve their CRT practice. The findings suggest that teachers should ask students what they would like to see changed in the classroom or at the school site. It is not expected that teachers will let students completely dictate how things are run in the classroom, but they should take time to listen and reflect on their own practice to determine if what they are doing is actually meeting the needs and desires of their students. At a school site level, schools should offer student forums that differ from traditional student government, in which students are invited to talk specifically about changes in content and pedagogy. Students recruited should be representational of the school (in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) and students who struggle academically should especially be heard.

The second research question in the study examined teacher perceptions of training on CRT. Based on the teacher frustration present in the findings, schools could benefit from including bottom-up PD training when discussing sensitive topics. If this is not possible due to

state or district mandates, one option might be to follow up outsider trainings with a teacher led presentation or discussion. That way, teachers can feel free to speak their minds and work with their colleagues to reflect and improve their CRT practices.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The achievement gap between BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and white students persists, despite the years of educational reform that has been implemented to bridge that gap (Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). One proposed pedagogy aiming to remove the inequities in education is called culturally relevant teaching (CRT). It is known by many names, such as culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, and engaged pedagogy but the idea is the same: to use the cultural backgrounds and experiences of students to inform not only the content, but the way in which content is taught (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). Many studies have presented CRT as a pathway to increased student engagement and academic success when implemented correctly (Byrd, 2016; Hammond, 2014; Sirrakos & Fraser, 2016). In California and in schools across the country, many teachers are looking for pedagogy that can engage a diverse population of students and culturally relevant teaching provides the necessary foundational framework for success.

This literature review aims to define CRT and bring to light the various obstacles that prevent authentic CRT from taking place. The first section of this literature review will explore education as a means of fighting inequity—a fundamental premise of CRT. I next move to a discussion of CRT and its effects on student learning. I will explore the historical background of CRT, the operational definition that I will be using in my research, and consider the connections between CRT, student engagement, and academic achievement. Finally, I will discuss in detail several obstacles to the implementation of CRT including “white fragility” in educators, global capitalism and the standardization of education, and the lack of an authentic student voice in the literature and practice of CRT.

Education as a Means of Fighting Inequity

Although educators such as Paolo Freire (2018) and bell hooks (1994) have argued that education should be a means for students to find their political voice and to fight against systems of oppression, this idea is not found in the average American classroom. Instead, many students are more likely familiar with a pedagogy Freire (1994) termed the “banking method” —in which the teacher holds all of the knowledge, while students must be like a sponge, soaking up all of the information provided by the teacher. In this approach to instruction, students know nothing, while the teacher holds all of the answers. In this style of teaching, it is made abundantly clear to students that content standards and classroom management are more important than student engagement and excitement for learning. Teachers who utilize the “banking method” also reproduce the message that reality is concrete and unchangeable, meaning that new ideas and new perceptions of the world are not asked for or expected in the traditional classroom (Freire, 2018). This then leads to the dangerous single-story narrative, as multiple perspectives on the same topic are not provided (Adichie, 2009; Freire, 2018; Gay, 2010).

While engagement is considered important, many teachers may view too much student engagement as contrary to maintaining the “atmosphere of seriousness” in academia (hooks, 1994, p. 7). Student opinions are rarely asked for; educators may even view student wants and desires as a threat to the traditional power structure of the classroom because the teacher may feel that they are no longer in control (Emdin, 2016; hooks, 1994). Due to this, the traditional method of teaching can lead to a breakdown in communication between students and teacher, as student voices are excluded.

The traditional banking approach can also lead to unconscious discriminatory practices, meaning that teachers treat students who look and act like them differently than students who

possess a cultural background that is different from the teacher's (Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2010; hooks, 1994). Moreover, in order to address achievement gaps in the classroom, white teachers may adopt something called the "white savior complex" or "messiah mentality" (Dee Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011). This is the idea that instead of *asking* students what they need or using a culturally relevant approach, teachers *assume* the needs of students and think of them as helpless victims who can only be saved by helping them to assimilate to the traditional education system.

Over time, the harmful effects mentioned above have led to inequities that are passed on from generation to generation (Kendi, 2019). Decades of schooling that treated BIPOC students as inferior and forced them to assimilate to the dominate white culture was and continues to be detrimental to their mental and physical health (Kendi, 2019). Furthermore, the consequences of institutionalized racism within schools lead to the school-to-prison pipeline, lack of access to higher education, and a lack of access to higher paying jobs due to an inadequate educational experience (Hammond, 2014; Kendi, 2019). The combination of these discriminatory practices puts BIPOC students at a disadvantage compared to their white counterparts because education is a social good used to advance up the socioeconomic ladder. These effects are not solely caused by a student's environment or lack of willpower, but by the traditional system of education that does not take into consideration the diversity of the population that it is serving.

According to educators like Freire (2018) and hooks (1994), the traditional system of education should be replaced with a more revolutionary system. Education can be considered revolutionary in that committing oneself to continually learning and reaching self-actualization is a direct threat to the systems of power in place currently (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). Paulo Freire's "critical consciousness" can be used to understand this more radical version of culturally relevant teaching. Critical consciousness can be defined as seeing the world for what it truly is,

calling out the oppressive structures, and understanding how to take action to remove these barriers that prevent true physical and intellectual freedom. This includes constantly questioning the current state of reality, having an open mind, and being flexible in your world view (Freire, 2018). Kendi (2019) argues that typical education reform does not do enough to make serious changes: if similar reforms did not work in the past, why would they work now? A more radical approach is necessary, or we will inevitably recreate the same mistakes, harming students in the process (Kendi, 2019).

Another example of how education can be a tool for students to overcome inequities is because they can be taught self-advocacy and encouraged to develop the agency to create change. In the traditional way of teaching, many students do not feel like their voice has power, their actions have weight, and their involvement can make a meaningful impact in the world around them (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). A large part of CRT is to show students that they have the power to drive their own learning and have an impact on the world around them (Hammond, 2014). According to Zaretta Hammond (2014), CRT encourages independent learners by helping them to develop a growth mindset. A growth mindset enables students to take responsibility for their own learning, to challenge themselves, and explore their own interests. They learn to be less reliant on the teacher and more reliant upon themselves to obtain knowledge and skills. In theory, if students are able to become self-driven in their education, they will learn to become self-driven in other areas of their lives.

To ensure that education is a mechanism that can be used to fight inequity in this country, education should be antiracist. Antiracism requires an active opposition to not only individual instances of racism, but to the oppressive structures that have created and perpetuate racism (Kendi, 2019; Pollock, 2008). Moreover, embracing the practice of being “colorblind” and

thinking of cultural diversity as only a “multicultural day” celebration or simply including multicultural books in the classroom, is harmful to BIPOC students. Teachers may excel in the building relationships with their culturally diverse students but may believe talking about issues such as race and racism is not appropriate for school. These approaches do not address the racialized world that students experience every day and how that may impact their learning (Pollock, 2008). In an antiracist classroom, students should be actively investigating racism and how it impacts their everyday lives, the lives of others, and how their education can be used to make a change. For teachers, this means that the curriculum is representative of a diverse student population and builds upon the experiences in lives of all students. Antiracist education means walking a fine line: finding balance between recognizing the role of race in the lives of students and treating everyone equitably, which is easier said than done (Pollock, 2008). It requires teachers to be aware of their grading procedures, the content and materials they choose to teach, their interactions with students and parents, and how they structure groupwork, to ensure that they are not subconsciously enacting discriminatory practices (Pollock, 2008). Therefore, educators can play a monumental role in promoting (or obstructing) social justice and equity.

Culturally relevant teaching and antiracist education have a lot of similarities, placing an emphasis on getting to know the needs of students and their cultural backgrounds before teaching them. Both rely upon the idea that we should actively discuss racism and radically change the way that we look at society and the education system as a whole. Antiracism takes CRT a step further, stressing the importance of continual self-critique, questioning the status quo, and having the courage to commit to a classroom for social justice (Kendi, 2019). Implementing culturally relevant and antiracist teaching is one effective way for teachers to work towards eliminating the

harmful effects of the traditional education system on BIPOC students (Gay 2010; Hammond, 2014).

Culturally Relevant Teaching and Benefits to Student Learning

The idea of a multicultural education has been around since the 1970s, following the end of the civil rights movement (Gay, 2010; Vavrus, 2008). The term *culturally relevant/responsive teaching* was first made popular by educators Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the increase in immigration and a changing racial/cultural population required curriculum that could address the needs of a variety of students (Vavrus, 2008). As the 21st century began, educational researchers saw that BIPOC students were grossly underperforming, with exceptionally higher dropout rates than their white counterparts (Vavrus, 2008). Clearly, the need for CRT became apparent. CRT rejects the deficit perspective which focuses on the skills and knowledge that students *don't* have rather than focusing on what they can bring to the table (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). Rejecting this assimilationist point of view, CRT aims to use students' "funds of knowledge," or the experiences from their home lives and cultures to shape the learning process (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). Multiple learning styles and methods of representation of the content are used to ensure that all students have access to the curriculum, regardless of their skill set or background.

Building upon the definition of CRT is Christopher Emdin's (2016) version of CRT called "reality pedagogy." Reality pedagogy extends the idea of "meeting each student on his or her cultural turf" (Emdin, 2016, p. 27). One of the main differences between traditional CRT and reality pedagogy is that the latter blurs the line between the role of teacher and student in terms of who holds the knowledge. Students engage in a "cogenerative dialogue", in which they

participate in small groups to discuss ways that the classroom content and/or structure of the class can be improved (Emdin, 2016).

Hip-hop based pedagogy (HHBE) is another concept related to culturally relevant teaching. This approach uses hip hop and rap music to spark interest in education and promote reading and writing skills in a way that is engaging to students (Irby et al., 2013; Prier, 2012). HHBE can be a means of resistance, a democratic practice, and a way to increase motivation and curb dropout rates, especially in male students of color (Prier, 2012). Because visual and oral learning are crucial in HHBE and CRT, using music videos, spoken word recordings, or similar media are important to the practice (Irby et al., 2013; Prier, 2012). Even if students don't listen to hip hop music, HHBE can still be a way for them to express themselves creatively and learn through a different modality.

While CRT may sound like the best solution to the achievement gap in education, opponents argue that an assimilationist approach is the better option. Educators like Ruby Payne (2003) think that a "culture of poverty" and the poor choices of individuals are to blame, instead of inequitable and racist power structures. The "culture of poverty" viewpoint implies that poor families and neighborhoods create conditions that are not ideal for learning, placing the blame on the parents and communities of the students, rather than the way they are being taught (Payne, 2003). Students are expected to conform to a white Eurocentric way of being, meaning that they are rewarded for being obedient and punished for acting in a way that does not conform to dominant culture (Emdin, 2016). While no one is arguing against the fact that it is harder to learn or to have access to resources when you are in a lower socioeconomic class, CRT can be a way to mediate that, not only pulling students out of poverty, but teaching them how to destroy the very structures that create poverty to begin with.

Undeniably, CRT can benefit students in many ways, such as increased student engagement (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). A study from Larson et al. (2018) found an association between observable culturally responsive teaching and positive behavior outcomes in students. In this study, researchers conducted classroom observations and collected self-reports from teachers. Years of teaching experience was not associated with more successful implementation of CRT, highlighting the fact that CRT can be used by teachers at any level. Thus, success is determined not only through the mastery of a specific set of skills, but also by the level of commitment teachers possess to get to know and teach to their students' needs. A study from Sirrakos and Fraser (2016) discovered that Emdin's reality pedagogy was effective in increasing student engagement in a school in the Bronx. Using a mixed-methods approach, researchers administered a student questionnaire to gather quantitative data. Semi-structured, flexible interviews were used to elucidate student perceptions about science and make the quantitative data clearer. Their work challenged the myth that minority students aren't interested in and capable of being successful in subjects like math and science. The work of Gay (2010), Hammond (2014), and Emdin (2016) demonstrate that student engagement increases in the classroom when students feel seen, heard, and represented in the curriculum. If the material is made personally relevant to them, students are more likely to be engaged because they see how the content relates to their everyday lives.

Not only does CRT increase student engagement and interest while learning, it also increases academic achievement. According to Geneva Gay (2010), "academic success and cultural consciousness are developed simultaneously," making it clear that multicultural education and academic achievement are not mutually exclusive (p. 36). Traditional teaching, especially of BIPOC students in urban schools is often repetitive, requiring rote memorization,

creating dependent learners who are not provided with instruction nor practice of higher order thinking skills (Hammond, 2014). Hammond (2014) describes the neuroscience behind CRT and how teaching in this way improves information processing and retention. Using a variety of modalities (visual, kinesthetic, auditory, etc.) that are present in students' cultures helps to strengthen neural pathways as students have already practiced using these learning aids (Hammond, 2014). She also writes that because CRT challenges students to think critically and creatively, their brains, similar to a muscle, are able to grow, therefore increasing thinking. A study from Gierhart (2019) determined that students who completed an art project following CRT guidelines scored significantly higher than those who did not. Because students in the CRT group were asked to relate their art project to a cause that they cared about, they clearly put more time and effort into it, resulting in a better grade. Challenging students to think critically about their reality but doing so in a way that uses knowledge and skills that they already have, demonstrates how CRT can increase academic achievement.

Obstacles to Culturally Relevant Teaching

Lack of Student Voice

A major obstacle to CRT is the lack of authentic student voice and empowerment in education. In many schools today, students are given the opportunity to share their opinions and their experiences with staff, but often those experiences are not given much weight (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). In most schools, asking students to share their voices becomes more of a performative act than actually giving them a platform in which to make change (Charteris & Smardon, 2019; Emdin, 2016; Zion, 2020). The inclusion of student voice in education is often downplayed by the assumption that, at the end of the day, all major decisions should be made by adults. Schools are missing out on the potential of student voices because they're not including

students who don't necessarily fit the mold of student representative or “model” student (Zion, 2020). Whether this is because teachers are afraid of what students might say when given a real platform to speak, or that they just don't know how to truly empower students is not clear. It is often the students that go unnoticed or fly under the radar that would benefit the most from having their voices heard. Zion (2020) argues that it would be more beneficial when holding students-staff conversations to try to seek out students who aren't “high” performers, who are struggling with school, and who feel that they aren't seen by their teachers. These are the students whose voices most need to be amplified—despite that fact, struggling students usually are underrepresented in student voice initiatives. Until they are, CRT is not being fully implemented and reaching its full potential.

Zion (2020) also discusses the lack of authentic student voice in educational practices, striving to remedy this by asking students what changes they wanted to see enacted at their school. Her study found that when students discussed their desires and the changes they wished to see in education, they requested the following: access to representative curriculum, representation in staff spaces, student-led focus groups on discrimination, and the ability to participate in teacher professional development. Student voice work clearly blurs the lines between the role of students and the role of teachers, but the mixing of the two worlds is necessary for successful culturally relevant education and an authentic learning experience (Emdin, 2016; Pollock, 2008; Zion, 2020). Asking for student input allows teachers to gain a better understanding of the student point of view and use their words to put content into context. This then allows teachers to deliver the content in a way that is more relatable and easier for students to learn (Pollock, 2008).

Teacher PD Training on CRT

Another potential obstacle to the implementation of CRT is teacher PD training on CRT, or social justice education in general. While the literature on this topic is sparse, there are a few studies that examine the effect of training on teacher practices. For example, a study from Mellom et al. (2018) examined how teachers of EL (English Learners) and Latinx students responded to a CRT training. Using questionnaires and bi-weekly data logs, researchers were able to determine how teachers were reacting to the training. They found that over time, many teachers had more positive views towards the linguistic diversity their EL students brought to the classroom and displayed a greater appreciation for diversity in general. In addition to teacher perceptions, researchers found that teachers reported higher levels of student engagement and better relationships with their students after the training.

Another study from McCormick et al. (2013) found positive change and growth within teachers after participating in a CRT yearlong training. The training consisted of a seminar course and a small group book study. Two hundred and seventy teachers (majority female) filled out open-ended survey at the end of the school year, reflecting on the course and their ability to teach students from diverse backgrounds. Findings suggest that teachers responded well to the training and felt that they had more empathy and understanding towards their students. They also were able to recognize that various outside factors that may be affecting how their students behave in the classroom. The researchers concluded from the findings that teachers benefitted from small group meetings because, “rather than attending a workshop where experts tell teachers what they need to be doing in the classrooms, these teachers developed their own expertise during their weekly meetings” (p. 12). When teachers were given the chance to take charge of

their own learning, they felt a sense of agency, making their perception of the training more positive.

White Fragility

A third potential obstacle to CRT is the unwillingness or inability of teachers to hold serious conversations on race in educational settings. As I discussed in the previous section, antiracism is a key component of CRT. If teachers and staff are not able to discuss how their positionality and race affects their teaching and their students, CRT will not be effective. DiAngelo (2018) talks about the concept of “white fragility”—white defensiveness towards conversations on race. One reason for this is that racism is equated with having no morals and being a “bad” person (DiAngelo, 2018). There is often little distinction between racist actions and racist people, so when racist actions are pointed out to them, people (particularly white people who have benefited the most from racist opportunity structures in society) may assume that they are being called out as a morally “bad” person (DiAngelo, 2018). Oftentimes, this leads to feelings of anger, outrage, shame, or denial that may cause people to either shut down and withdraw from the conversation or become upset and argumentative. White fragility may also be triggered by the possible loss of privilege that people have grown accustomed to having such as not being able to guide conversations on racism; in other words, not being given the ability or power to control the conversation like they may have been used to doing (DiAngelo, 2018).

In educational contexts specifically, white educators may feel uncomfortable because they have little to no education on race/racism and don't understand the world through racialized experiences like their BIPOC colleagues (DiAngelo, 2018). They may feel a loss of control due to the fact that they are not knowledgeable in this area; it is a challenge to their perceived expertise, and suggests incompetence in their job (hooks, 1994). This phenomenon has shown to

be present in administrators, teachers, and pre-service teachers. Hines (2016) discusses white fragility specifically within the population of white administrators. Even though the participants in his study were willing to talk about race openly, they still displayed signs of white fragility and the rejection of the notion of white privilege. In this way, they showed a sort of cognitive dissonance, believing that they were truly not racist, while still holding onto ideas and perpetuating practices that were indeed racist.

Research studies also show that white teachers display signs of white fragility. In a case study from Patton and Jordan (2017), a black female vice principal attempted to implement CRT and conversations on privilege and race during professional development training. She was met with opposition from white educators, who accused her of harassment. After little support from her principal, she was forced to end her professional development training. Not having the experience and training to deal with tensions related to race in their classroom may have caused many of the teachers to “bury their heads in the sand” rather than experience situations that might make them or their students uncomfortable but would have led to real growth and learning experiences for all parties (hooks, 1994).

Masko and Bloem (2017) also received pushback from pre-service teachers when discussing the role of race in education in their teacher credential program classes. However, the authors found that these uncomfortable feelings can be assuaged by using children’s literature to talk about race and privilege. While there may be some criticism in the fact that the only way for white educators to feel comfortable talking about race is through children's literature, it does show that creating and building upon peoples’ feelings of empathy makes it easier to talk about race regardless of their race. In a way, this is CRT—meeting people where they are. If educators are unable to be open and vulnerable with students on challenging issues such as race, they will

have a harder time engaging with students and providing them with the space to share their unedited voices and experiences (hooks, 1994).

Furthermore, discussing race and racism may feel like a personal attack on white people, which is how the term “reverse racism” came into being (Kendi, 2019). Kendi goes on to say that this is because white people fail to distinguish between power structures created by racist whites and white people in general (Kendi, 2019). Often the two concepts are conflated (i.e., whiteness being conflated with racist) which makes white educators feel personally attacked. Ironically, according to Kendi, this very idea of “reverse racism” serves to fuel racist power structures because the feeling of being attacked only leads to more divisiveness and the continuation of racist practices and institutionalized racism.

The only way for white educators to confront white fragility is for them to educate themselves on these racist power structures and to emphasize the point that they do not have to feel guilty for structures that they did not put into place. If white teachers can be made to see their role in potentially dismantling the structures that harm their BIPOC students, it may be easier, in theory, for them to discuss race without feeling uncomfortable or upset.

Standardization of Education

Finally, a fourth obstacle to CRT is global capitalism and the corresponding standardization of education. Hajisoteriou and Angelides (2020) claim that an increase in globalization in recent years has had a negative effect on teachers’ ability to bring social justice into the classroom. They argue that as part of the national emphasis on competing in the global economy, there has been an increased focus on standardizing education, not for the sake of education and knowledge, but to increase innovation and technologies that can help to make a country richer. Standardizing and tracking education has put pressure on teachers to acquire

certain results from students and left little time to teach about things like empathy, civics, and other elements of social justice (Hajisoteriou and Angelides, 2020). They also argue that the cultural and educational assimilation caused by standardization of education has led to marginalization and inequity. If students are only taught in a singular way, students who are not able to assimilate fall behind.

The education system is structured to benefit capitalism: producing cookie cutter workers who are good at completing repetitive tasks, but not necessarily thinking critically and questioning the status quo (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). In fact, in traditional teaching, teachers are expected to teach students how to behave, how to follow instructions, how to do what they are told. Rarely are students provided the opportunity to have a say in the structure of the class, the content that they are learning, or the ways in which they receive the information (Emdin, 2016; hooks, 1994). While this focus on college and career readiness is certainly important, equally important is the idea that the purpose of education is to create informed citizens who are able to fully participate in a democratic society (Freire, 2018). Hooks (1994) recalls that in her own experience during school integration, she noticed the content in white schools was more standardized. Students were expected to conform rather than challenge the status quo, think critically, or voice their thoughts and opinions. She adds that docile and obedient behavior was more important than curiosity and self-directed learning. Rather than being a place where students can develop their own passions and follow their interests, school became a place of confinement; students were taught to restrain themselves. Not only is this demoralizing to the individual, but it's also harmful to true democracy. If students are not taught that their voices can be used to create change, they may grow up to be adults who are too afraid to voice their opinions about social and political issues. In this way, their voices are being suppressed.

Conclusion

The current literature on CRT shows that there are numerous positive effects for students. The overall strengths of the literature include the emergence of neuroscience to help educators understand the effects of CRT on the brain (Hammond, 2014). This work will continue to help educators make a strong case for CRT in all schools. Additionally, there are countless articles clearly defining CRT and providing educators with numerous ways to implement it into the classroom (Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). If teachers are not offered professional development on CRT at their school site, they can turn to the literature to gain a basic understanding of how to implement CRT in a variety of ways. Ongoing critiques in the academic literature demonstrate the need to continually push for a more radical CRT that truly meets the needs of students at more than surface level (Emdin, 2016; Pollock, 2008). In response to this, schools across the country have decided to implement CRT into their professional development plans and student teachers are introduced to the idea in their credential programs. Finally, the literature on antiracist education has pushed educators to question the status quo in education and to create a truly liberating curriculum (Kendi, 2019; Pollock, 2008).

A weakness in the literature is the ambiguity between the term antiracist education and culturally relevant teaching; they are often discussed as if they are two separate things. This is problematic because teachers may assume that CRT is solely about knowing students' backgrounds and building relationships—while avoiding topics that challenge the racist structure of society altogether. While these two things are important, CRT should also include a focus on education for social justice, in which students learn to think critically and learn how to use their agency to create change. Another weakness in the literature is the fact that student voices are not often a part of research investigating CRT; students are subjects, but not necessarily active

participants in the research. This is important because CRT was designed to benefit students; if their voices are not present in the definition and implementation of CRT, then it defeats the whole purpose of this pedagogy. The key tenants of CRT involve student agency, empowerment, and becoming independent learners, and for this to happen, students need to be given the opportunity to speak their minds and take an active role in their education.

It's also clear that more research is needed to determine how effective CRT trainings are for teachers. Simply assigning teachers to attend a training is not a guarantee that they will learn the necessary skills to effectively implement CRT, much less be convinced of the need to change their teaching practices. A second major gap in knowledge in the academic literature is the absence of studies examining the effects of white fragility in teachers or how to successfully address white fragility in PD on CRT. If teachers are not able to confront their biases and examine the role of race in education, true change cannot occur. Additionally, there is only an emerging discussion in the academic literature on appropriate strategies to overcome white fragility without causing further divisiveness and tension at a school site. The lack of research on this topic makes this obstacle to CRT less visible and therefore less likely to be overcome.

My research examined some of the current obstacles impeding authentic CRT. Specifically, I focused on how student voice and desires can be used to develop a more successful, empowering CRT curriculum. Second, I explored how teachers respond to PD training on CRT and how a white identity might affect that response. The purpose of this research was to better understand students' educational experiences and their desires for an authentic culturally relevant education. In other words, how do students operationally define culturally relevant teaching? Equally important, this research aimed to address the issue of ineffective CRT training and the changes that can be made to make it more successful.

Chapter 3: Methods

The literature review revealed the need for student voice in the classroom and the lack of information on teacher perceptions of professional development training on CRT. The current study aims to explore what students desire from education and how their desires compare to teacher ideas of CRT. Another goal is to gain insight into how teachers at the school site perceive CRT and consider the suggestions they have to improve the 2020-2021 yearlong PD training on CRT. The research questions for this study include:

1. How do student ideas about education compare to teacher understandings of culturally relevant teaching?
2. How do teachers perceive professional development training on culturally relevant teaching?
 - a. How might a white identity influence how teachers perceive CRT training?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

My research paradigm was influenced by both the constructivist worldview and the transformative worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A constructivist approach seeks to understand the subjective truth of an interviewee based upon how they see and interpret the world around them; exploring *why* they think the way they do. Instead of trying to find an objective truth in the words of the participants, the researcher looks “for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.7). In other words, it is more important to document the differences and nuances in the words of participants, than it is to find a specific answer or evidence in support of a single theory. In my research, I hoped to converse with students about culturally relevant education in order to gain insight into their view of the education system in general and their experience at the school site,

specifically. To capture their experiences, I used open-ended questioning and critical listening. Critical listening involves conversing with an interviewee like one would in a regular conversation, as well as evaluating the meaning and context behind the words participants use (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013).

Additionally, I was mindful of how students' backgrounds may affect their responses to my questions. I believed it was important to enter research and interviews with an understanding of what life is like for the community you are researching. In this way, the researcher does not enter with a preconceived notion of that community, one that may unintentionally shape the way the researcher asks questions or the lens in through which responses are analyzed. Researchers should be aware that the way they view the experiences and possible hardships of a community may be at odds with what people in the community actually experience or how they view themselves. Understanding the paradigm of the community a researcher is studying is crucial so that they don't cause damage to the community by either interpreting their stories in a flawed or distorted manner, or providing an unwanted or impractical solution (Tuck, 2009).

Similar to the constructivist approach, the transformative approach looks at how people, particularly marginalized groups, view the world. This approach also focuses on "issues such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation," and emphasizes the idea that the research collected should be used to bring social and political change to a community (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.17). The key belief in this approach is that research that does not result in change, is fruitless.

Another component of my research approach is the use of a "dialogic circle." A dialogic circle is defined as the process of "interacting and engaging [in] an idea together" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013, p. 25). Like the word suggests, it is two people having a dialogue where there

is relatively equal participation by both people. Related to this concept is the dialogic spiral, in which “the conversation moves back and forth when the speaker becomes the listener, and the listener becomes the speaker” (p. 30). During the conversation, an idea is spoken aloud as it is thought and processed with the other person, instead of in isolation in one of the participant’s heads. A dialogic circle involves critical listening from both participants, paying attention to what they are saying with intent and purpose. It includes considering the perspective of the person speaking and their word choice. This differs from simply “hearing” the other person because you are actively thinking about what the person is saying, constructing meaning as they speak, and responding thoughtfully. Through the use of the dialogic circle during the research process, the role of the researcher shifts from observer to a “listener, learner, advocate, participant” (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013, p. 22). Embracing these four roles will lead to the collection of more authentic conversations and therefore more valid data.

Finally, my research will follow a desire-based approach, focusing on the desires and needs of students (Tuck, 2009). I will not be focusing on the damage and trauma that many of my students have experienced, but instead on how to remedy it through the implementation of an anti-racist, multicultural, culturally relevant curriculum in collaboration with students. I think my research can be used by all teachers, especially teachers with a high population of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) students. Ultimately, I hope that by focusing my research on the desires of students, it will allow me to work towards a solution or an “antidote” to a “poison”—that poison being an inequitable education for students of color (Tuck, 2009, p. 416).

I collected qualitative data for my research because it fits most closely with my philosophical worldview. I held a focus group with two tenth graders to discuss culturally relevant teaching and explore what students wanted from the curriculum and from teachers. I

also interviewed teachers to discuss CRT and their experience with the yearlong PD training on CRT at the school site. In-depth and open-ended questions provided better answers than quantitative surveys because I wanted to understand how students make meaning of their school experiences. Determining what students want from a teacher, from curriculum, from their education, cannot simply be captured in a survey. Holding a focus group with students allowed me to start and guide the conversation with my questions but also allowed students to take the reins occasionally and lead the conversation themselves. Interviewing teachers allowed me to understand how they see and make meaning of CRT and conversations on race. Understanding the complexities of teacher perceptions on CRT required in-depth answers in order to uncover possibilities for improving PD training on CRT.

Research Design

Research Site

I chose to conduct research at a suburban school in Northern California with a total population of about 600 students. About 71.8% of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged and 11.4% are English Learners (California Department of Education, 2017). I am a first-year teacher at the school site, teaching eighth and tenth grade history. The school site has a seven-period day, so full-time educators teach six classes with about 170 students overall. Class sizes range from 16 to 35 students depending on the grade. I wanted my research to make a positive impact at my school, so I thought it would be powerful to include the voices of students and staff at the school in my research. Additionally, my principal was fully on board with my research topic as we are currently involved in a year-long professional development training on CRT. This research is particularly informative at my school site because about 60% of the school population is African American and Latinx—students who will greatly benefit from culturally

relevant teaching and who have likely been left out due to more traditional teaching models and methods.

The covid-19 pandemic played a significant role in how this study was carried out. From September 2020 to the conclusion of data collection, students participated in a fully distance learning model. Therefore, all communication with students and teachers occurred over Zoom, Google Classroom, or email. As students were not required to turn their cameras on during synchronous instruction on Zoom, I did not know what many of my students looked like or sounded like. Unfortunately, I had no form of communication with several students on my roster. While I was able to meet a few teachers at my school site over the summer during my interview and training days, I have never met most of the staff in person. Overall, the covid-19 pandemic limited my ability to establish and maintain significant relationships with both students and staff.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

I used voluntary sampling to determine my participant population. I selected all eighth and tenth grade students from my general education U.S. History and World History classes who were interested in participating in my research. To recruit students, I made an oral announcement on Zoom at the start of class, asking for volunteers. Students let me know privately in the chat or via email if they were interested in participating in the study. I posted the announcement in writing on all six of my Google Classrooms so that students who were absent could see the announcement too. Parents who are added to Google Classroom could also see this announcement. The message defined culturally relevant teaching and stated that the purpose was to find out more about student experiences in education. Students were asked to participate so that their desires could be used to inform the way that teachers teach at the school site, and potentially in other schools. Student participants were between the ages of 13 and 15. Three were

white males, one was Latina, and one was an African American female (see Appendix C for student demographics). I did not select students based on gender or race/ethnicity, and the option to participate was completely voluntary.

In order to recruit teachers for the study, I sent out an email to all teachers to request volunteers to interview. I explained in my email that I was conducting research for my master's on CRT and wanted to interview them to understand their definitions and perspectives on CRT. A total of ten teachers reached out, but I decided to limit the number of teacher interviews to four due to time constraints. I did not take gender, ethnicity, age, etc. into account when choosing my interviewees, but instead invited teachers from different departments to participate. Out of the five teacher participants, two were white males, one was a white female, and the fourth was a female teacher whose I did not know. Teacher experience in the classroom ranged from 15 to 30 years. Due to the small size of the staff, I was careful to limit the amount of demographic information detailed here as to not jeopardize the anonymity of the teacher participants.

Students and teachers who agreed to participate in the study were continuously reminded that the study was completely voluntary, and that all answers and information would remain confidential. Students were assured that no grade would be attached to the assignment. They were informed that participating in the study would enter them into a raffle to win a \$20 Amazon gift card. To interview students, I requested a parent signature on the permission slip. Parents, students, and teachers digitally signed the permission slip/consent form and emailed a PDF of the signed document. I also required oral consent on the day of the interview. It should also be noted that all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Methods

The student focus group meeting lasted approximately 30 minutes and took place online via Zoom conferencing during the first part of lunch. Waiting room functions were turned on and students signed in with their school emails to access the focus group. That way, only the students who were a part of the focus group could join. The focus group began with a reminder of the purpose of the study and that students had the right to leave or withdraw their answers at any time. Next, I posed a question and students took turns answering. Students had the ability to pose their own questions to the group and build upon answers from each other. The three students that were interviewed were also interviewed during the first part of lunch or right after class via Zoom. Interviews typically lasted 20 minutes or less. All Zoom meetings were recorded for transcription purposes. Students were allowed to have their cameras off and were informed that the meetings would be recorded. If students did not wish to answer out loud, they had the option to answer a question or provide feedback in the private Zoom chat. Interview questions asked students to explain their overall experience with education, detailing a favorite lesson or describing a favorite teacher (e.g., Describe a lesson that had an impact on you? What made it so memorable?). Towards the end of the focus group and interviews, students were asked to share their final thoughts on what they would like to see changed at their school site. See Appendix A for the complete list of interview questions.

Staff interviews were also conducted via Zoom after school or during teacher preparation periods. Teachers were informed that the Zoom meeting would be recorded. Participants had the option to turn their camera off if they did not feel comfortable with their face being in the Zoom recording. They were reminded of the information on the consent form and that they could pass on any question that they did not feel comfortable answering, prior to the start of the interview.

Teachers were asked to provide their definition of CRT and to give examples of how they implemented it in their classroom. Participants were also invited to talk about their experience with the year-long training on CRT (e.g., How do you feel about the current professional development training on culturally relevant teaching?) See Appendix B for the full set of teacher interview questions.

Data Analysis

Data collected during focus groups and interviews was saved to my computer and transcribed by listening to each recording at half speed and typing out the transcriptions in a document saved to my password-protected computer. In order to capture the conversations more precisely, I not only transcribed the words verbatim, but also instances of hesitation, laughing, sighing, pausing, etc. to provide myself and my readers with the full picture of responses. While the transcriptions included initials of each participant, the initials are not present in the published work.

To analyze my data, I followed several strategies suggested by Maxwell (2013). First, I used analytic memos throughout and after the data collection process. Whenever I came across any interesting pieces of information, new connections, or ideas of possible codes, I wrote a memo to help further develop my thoughts. Another strategy that I used was to interact with my data and transcriptions several times during the one-month period of data analysis. After transcribing the data, I skimmed over the transcription, without codes in mind. The second time (or any consecutive occurrences), I completed a close reading of the data. The purpose of the close reading was to determine any overarching themes, note any conflicting ideas, as well as connections within a transcription and with other transcriptions.

At the start of my categorizing process, I used coding to group my data into categories. There were a few codes that I expected to see before beginning the data analysis process: examples of successful culturally relevant teaching, examples of poor implementation of CRT, instances of white fragility, and students wants and desires. However, I wanted to use an open coding process so that my preconceived notions about the data did not cloud my analysis. I read through the transcripts once without codes in mind to determine if codes existed that were not on my list of expected codes. I also worked with peers in my graduate classes to help code the data. A fresh pair of eyes on the data helped me to come up with unexpected codes that were not obvious to me, including: emotions, student voice, the void, social justice, and social emotional learning.

After open coding, I used concept mapping to identify possible categories and themes for my data. I worked with peers to further develop my final concept map. Laying out the codes in this way helped me to come up with connections later on in the analysis process. I printed each transcript and used different colored highlighters to highlight quotes or passages that fit with each code. This helped me to locate quotes from the data to specific themes that emerged during my analysis.

Narrative analysis helped me to make connections within individual pieces of data and to connect ideas between all sets of data. Focusing on the background of each participant and how it related to their answers, helped me to derive more meaningful ideas from the data. The process allowed me to “read between the lines” and to consider how the words of participants may be interpreted from many different angles. Finally, I created detailed summaries of my findings in the form of analytic memos, compared the findings back to the literature review, and wrote additional memos about my personal connections, opinions, and experiences during data collection and

analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I found that these three strategies allowed me to fully engage with the data and find multiple connections and interpretations.

Validity

Researcher bias is a possible threat to the validity of this study. I am a strong proponent of culturally relevant teaching and wanted to find ways to improve its implementation, which likely affected the way that I interpreted the data. I am also the youngest teacher at my school site, so I wanted to make a good impression on my colleagues. This may have affected the way that I interviewed other teachers, preventing me from asking follow-up questions or pressing for more in-depth answers. My personal experience with CRT is another element of my own researcher bias. I have had a very positive experience being taught by teachers who used CRT. In their classroom, I felt like my opinion and voice mattered and I was challenged to become more creative and open-minded as a student. In my own teaching experience, I have found that using CRT in the classroom has resulted in more engagement from students who would normally struggle, more meaningful conversations about the content, and an increased sense of community in the classroom.

Another threat to validity is participant reactivity. Because the students in the focus group were my students, they may have given answers that they thought I wanted to hear. At the same time, this could work the other way as well—students may have felt comfortable speaking their mind to me because they know me well. Similar to my students, staff members may also have had preconceived ideas about the answers that they thought I was looking for. There is also the possibility that they sanitized their answers so that they would appear a certain way to me and other staff members who may read my research.

In particular, my race and level of education may have affected both my bias as a researcher, and participants' responses to me. My education level may have caused students to be less willing to share because they think that research requires an academic answer, and they don't want to sound unintelligent. It also means that I have my own views on what a good education is and what it should look like, likely affecting my interpretation of the data. Students of color may have been afraid to speak openly on race and ethnicity because I am white and they could have assumed that I either don't want to hear certain aspects of their experiences, or that they don't feel comfortable talking about issues that they know I don't have experience with.

Maxwell (2013) and Creswell and Creswell (2018) detail strategies to use to increase validity in a study. I used triangulation by collecting information from both students and teachers. Having two "categories" of participants allowed me to explore different viewpoints on the same issues, increasing the chance that the information I collected was valid. I also made sure to collect detailed data from my focus groups and interviews through the use of open-ended questions and made sure that participants had plenty of time to provide more than surface-level answers.

After collecting my data, I used several other strategies to address validity concerns. First, I reminded participants that they had the ability to recant anything they thought did not represent how they truly felt at the beginning and end of the study. That way, participants could clarify any part of their interview they felt was not accurately represented. Next, I made sure to give attention to any conflicting pieces of data during my analysis. Even if answers went against my preconceived ideas based on my review of the academic literature, I chose to analyze and include them in my discussion of the data. I strove to come up with as many explanations for data points as possible. Instead of assuming that the data collected automatically supported my

claims in the literature review, I tried to find several other viable explanations that could explain the answers that I received in the focus groups and interviews. Finally, I chose to use “rich thick description” in my data collection and write-up of the findings, another strategy from Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 200). Providing multiple details and context from my conversations in the field provided a more accurate, and holistic picture of my findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

Much of the research on CRT (culturally relevant teaching) does not feature the perspectives of teachers and students on their experiences with the implementation of CRT. The goal of this study was to gather data from students about their desires and experiences in education to help teachers improve their culturally relevant practice. Additionally, this study collected information from teachers on the effectiveness of CRT professional development and explored the implications of white identity during the training.

Overall, the findings discussed below demonstrate a gap or “void” in understanding among and between different parties in the educational system which is impeding effective culturally relevant teaching. In what follows, I first examine the students’ point of view about their own education. These findings illustrate students’ positive and negative perspectives on school, as well as their suggestions to make their educational experience better. According to educational researchers, student input is a key component of authentic CRT (Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2010). The second theme examines teachers’ understanding of CRT. All four teachers discussed the importance of relationship building in their definition of CRT. The findings indicate that while many teachers had a strong basic understanding of CRT, others struggled to understand or implement these practices fully. Finally, the third theme explores teachers’ criticism of CRT, in general, and specific critiques about the training the school site received on the topic. Two teachers expressed frustrations about the training model and felt they could not voice their opinions about the training, which highlights a second disconnect in the understanding about CRT between the perspective of teachers and administration.

Student Desires and Perceptions of Their Educational Experience

Students' Overall Experience

Understanding and asking students how they view school and its purpose can help teachers to adapt their teaching to align with student desires. The majority of students involved in this study described the purpose of school as preparation for life. During the interviews and focus group, students explained that school was, “like a simulation for the real world,” “to build up your base knowledge,” “so you don’t just do nothing all day and not have a job or anything,” and “so eventually you can go to college and like get a good job.” These comments show that many students see schools as providing them with the practical skills necessary to prepare them for life after high school. One focus group student, Alex, said that he thought “the purpose of school is to teach kids that need to be taught,” meaning students who learn at a slower pace or students with disabilities. Alex thought that kids who tend to learn quickly and independently don’t need school as much as their peers who did not fit into that category.

Another aspect of understanding student experience requires asking students what teachers specifically can do to improve students’ educational experiences. When asked about their favorite teachers, students highlighted positive relationships as being a hallmark of a good teacher. Brianna, a tenth grader, explained that, “we tend to understand each other and so that’s personally what made her class a lot more fun is to have a teacher I could share things with that would be kind of similar to my own doing.” The second focus group student, Jack, discussed his favorite teacher and said, “they were able to like connect with the students on a personal level and be able to like (pause) kind of like interact with them in somewhat in a way that friends would interact.” For Jack, even in the case of getting reprimanded for breaking school rules, he

said that “it’s still like a conversation” with the teacher as opposed to a more “one-sided” disciplinary action. Teachers who made students feel seen and heard appeared to be favorites.

Utilizing a variety of strategies to teach students from all different backgrounds is another important component of criteria students used to evaluate their educational experiences. Some students felt like the learning modality that they like best was not used by all teachers. For example, Alex wished to see more hands-on learning in his math classroom because—“like I can’t just watch what they’re doing and then copy what they did...I have to watch, then do it and then go watch them do it, and then have them do it again and I go along with it.” He felt that his math teacher would often go through the content too quickly, asking them to follow along, but not pausing to allow them time to try it on their own. Courtney, an eighth grader, felt that even though her learning needs were met, the needs of other students may not be:

...some teachers like do more of one thing and they kind of forget about other kinds of learners...Sometimes they would focus on some, on some different learners than the rest so then like you would get kind of confused if you prefer one thing than the other. Like, I would say one of my teachers, he would like focus a lot on visuals, so like for those who did a lot of listening would have like a lot of trouble with it.”

Courtney recognized that while the teacher taught in such a way that she was able to achieve academically, other students were left out, implying that teachers don’t often explicitly ask students how they learn best.

A third component of CRT is to feature student voices in the classroom whenever possible. When asked if students felt their voice was heard at school, two students felt that it depended on the situation. For example, Brianna said that she did not feel she could discuss her more conservative political views on campus. When asked if she had ever tried, she replied

“nope, I’m not going to try because I’m like scared.” She often felt alienated from other students during class conversations on politics because she knew that the majority of the class would turn on her for holding political points of view that were dissimilar to their own. It is unclear if her teachers did not create an environment in which she felt safe enough to speak up or if she felt anxious in general during whole class discussions. Alex said, “like there are people that like, there are, staff, like in the district that will hear us out but it’s not necessarily going to happen because, like we could bring it up as many times as we want and try to convince them but I very much doubt that things will be taught.” Alex was referencing the proposed change to curriculum that the focus group brought up regarding making content more representational. In general, students agreed that they did have somewhere to go if they needed to voice their opinion but were not confident that they would necessarily be listened to or taken seriously. Students have opportunities to talk with the principal at lunch and for the most part, teachers are open to student suggestions, but student opinions and desires are rarely asked for explicitly.

As discussed earlier, student participants stressed the importance of relationships with teachers. However, Jack discussed the disconnect between teachers and students. He felt that teachers may have a superficial idea of what it means to be a student and aren’t able to truly understand what students desire and need in their learning

...there’s a sense of forgetting where you came from. You were once that kid in public schools that had this curriculum or whatever, that saw this wide discrepancy of learning and all that good stuff...and you might forget that when you’re 35 or whatever in college or post college, living the great life, living the good life.

Jack went on to explain that he is writing down his current educational experience so that when he is able to make a difference as an adult, he will remember exactly what someone his age

thinks about school. His comments emphasize the importance in CRT of teachers putting themselves in their students' shoes to truly understand their experiences and what might be going on in their heads. Otherwise, the gap between what teachers think students need and what students actually want will continue to grow.

Desire for more Diverse Content

When students were asked if they saw themselves in the curriculum, the majority of them answered that they did not. Courtney said, "Uh, not all the time. It really depends on like, what they're teaching in the curriculum and stuff...but at this point, not really." When reading fiction, she said that she noticed the subjects in the books were often "not really characters or [they were] like animals sometimes, not so much human." This comment seems to suggest that non-human characters were more common than characters that actually looked like students. Brianna answered, "Hmm, to tell you the truth, I don't really see too many people that are in my similar situation." By "similar situation" this student meant someone that physically looked like her or someone with a similar cultural background. When she was asked if that would be a change she would like to see, she said, "I think it would be cool." Part of CRT is using students' background to build content and curriculum, which would include materials that represent BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and other identities that match those identities held by students at this school site.

Alex started to say that he saw people like himself represented in the content but then quickly realized that he could not recall a single lesson on the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc.) community in school. He details why this is an issue in the following response:

We don't learn a lot of stuff about like (pause) LGBT representation and we don't learn LGBT history in World History and so a lot of that is like really misrepresented and like, it gives people like, barely any academic (pause), like understanding of how, what, stuff happened and how that stuff went on.

Jack responded to this comment saying that "it kind of forces us to like self-teach ourselves if we want to learn more." He didn't necessarily think this is a bad thing but recognizes that a credentialed teacher is likely going to provide a more comprehensive lesson than what students can find in books or on the internet.

Students also discussed the relationship between identity and historical knowledge. The focus group students (Jack and Alex) brought up the idea that people will likely know information and history of people that have similar identities to them—

Like Alex probably knows a fair amount of LGBTQ history because they are LGBTQ, well, and, but like I don't know it, like, or like someone else doesn't know as much because they aren't. Because it's not being taught and they're not like seeking it out because they don't connect as much to it.

This comment highlights the importance of school being one of the few places where students are exposed to varying points of view. When these points of view are not included, bullying and prejudice may occur. Alex said, "I've definitely seen at our school like I hear guys in our school call things 'gay' or 'fruity'" and indicated that more of an inclusion of groups like the LGBTQ community or people with disabilities in curriculum might help to curb some of this language. This makes clear the idea that teachers and students tend to gravitate towards learning about people that look similar to them. In order to foster more understanding for different identities and experiences, a variety of points of view and cultures need to be included in the curriculum. As

the students pointed out, the majority of people will not seek out this information on their own and may be uninformed or misinformed on groups of people that are different from themselves.

Students Expressed a Wish for Social Emotional Learning

While teachers did not specifically highlight SEL in their interviews, students did. When students were asked about their favorite lessons or experiences at school, many of them chose to focus more on life or social lessons, rather than academics. For example, Brianna spoke about the lesson she learned from a bullying experience– “you shouldn’t care what anybody thinks, do it for you, and not for anybody that’s judging you.” Courtney had a difficult time answering the question about her favorite experiences in school, but finally decided that “I think it’s the things that you learn in class like with certain topics that you’re like, this is something that has happened that has changed someone’s life like throughout history or in any class.” While Courtney could not think of a specific example, she explained that lessons that inspired her to make a change in her own life were the most meaningful.

Jack and Alex spent a significant portion of the focus group session discussing social learning and SEL. They began the conversation by bringing up the “chaotic” and “rough” social interactions of 7th grade– “like we were not the best of people to each other”, “we weren’t very emotionally or like socially mature,” “like a bunch of us had feuds with each other,” “a bunch of us didn’t know how to like emotionally handle it,” “we were so toxic to each other...we just didn’t realize it.” Students recognized that they did not have the social skills to successfully handle social conflict, and in turn this impeded their mental health and therefore their academic learning. Alex said that his social experiences were actually more impactful than any lesson from a teacher. In response to the favorite lesson question, he said that he didn’t have a favorite academic lesson because, “I didn’t learn a lot from teachers, I learned more from students.” Alex

was not implying that he didn't like any of his teachers, but that his most memorable moments in the classroom were more likely to involve peers rather than teachers.

After the students finished describing their 7th grade social concerns, we discussed the role of teachers and school in preventing negative social situations. "I mean we did eventually have a teacher [come in] and just have a civil conversation for the most part, and, and it was a lot of like just listening." Though teacher interventions were helpful, the two students agreed that it would be beneficial if teachers took the time to teach communication and social emotional skills, starting long before middle school and the "eruption of these things." Jack specifically stated that he wished to see some kind of mandatory sociology classes where students learned about—

...how people react to certain things and just kind of like the history and kind of the human psychology and how words can affect someone and kind of how it can either bring them up or take them down with the snap of a finger basically. And just kind of like, how the whole thing of like the consequences of actions, words, and what you say and all that stuff.

These students recognized that, "the social aspect is very like, I think is really important for like setting up like, people's relationship with school and learning" and agreed that some sort of SEL class would make the academic element of school easier.

Teacher Definitions and Understandings of Culturally Relevant Teaching

General Overview and Examples

When asked to define CRT in their own words, most teachers talked about understanding the different backgrounds of the students in their class and teaching them in a way that would make sense based on their background. One teacher, Mr. Johnson, explained—

It's just being aware of different learning styles and different needs and providing different types of scaffolds that would support pretty much any kind of learner and being aware as a teacher that single methods of teaching will inherently exclude some people from the curriculum one way or another.

The idea that teachers should try to avoid the "single method" approach was discussed by another teacher, Mrs. Evans, in her definition of CRT:

I have to think about the culture that I'm teaching from, what the expectations are of that culture...so you have to be thinking about all the different ways that the students might approach this concept versus the way that I want them to understand the culture that I'm sharing with them.

This teacher illuminates the idea of recognizing how your own background affects how you view students and how you teach. Also highlighted in this quote is the idea that there should be multiple ways for students to approach an idea or a lesson. Though teachers discussed using different modalities in the classroom, the student interviews suggested that this was not necessarily happening in most classes from students' perspectives.

Many of the teachers discussed seeing the whole student and going deeper than surface level in their understanding of each individual. One teacher, Mr. Snyder, used the word "caricature" instead of stereotype. He discusses this idea below in his definition of CRT:

...it really comes down to, the way I see it, getting to know the students beyond just the caricature,...the cartoon, the superficial image of a person. And when you get past that piece, and start understanding what the student really is about, you start...to find ways of connecting with them that you never would have seen before.

All four teachers discussed the importance of “developing relationships with students and building their trust.” Although this piece was difficult to accomplish with online learning during the 2020-2021 academic year, Mrs. Evans talked about how she will “pull a student in early and...chat with them,” because she knows that many students “just want to talk.” Another teacher, Ms. Adams, describes how she says “good morning to every single student every day” on Zoom. Even if she can’t see their face, she will read off names so that students know she “sees” them.

Only Mr. Johnson discussed the social justice as a component of CRT by describing the book used in the training (Zaretta Hammond’s *Culturally Relevant Teaching and the Brain*) as a “[synthesis of] a lot of the components of abolitionist teaching and concepts of antiracism.” In his definition of CRT, he talked about the concept of being “woke” as “being able to see the world as it is, even if it’s really uncomfortable... I embrace that my starting point is probably being wrong and being willing to see what it might be (laughs) if I didn’t insist on it being a certain way.” Part of antiracism, especially for people new to the idea is to confront discomfort, dissect why we might feel a certain way, and then learn and grow from these feelings. This is a foundational part of CRT and crucial for teachers to understand so that they can prevent implicit biases from impacting their teaching.

Supporting Student Empowerment, Voice, and Expression

Including student voice in the classroom is another key ingredient to culturally relevant teaching. This means making students feel comfortable speaking their minds and bringing their own cultural backgrounds into the classroom. Teachers discussed the ways that they build conversations into their lessons in order to promote more student expression. These activities included Socratic Seminars, guided conversations, and various projects that were student-led.

One example was a unit on stereotypes and identity from Mrs. Evans. Students discussed and dissected different stereotypes of different groups of students at school (jocks, goths, choir students, etc.). Mrs. Evans described the engaged student reaction to her unit, “you see the kids that belong to one of those groups, suddenly, exposed in a way that they feel valued.” Instead of downplaying the fact that students have widely different identities and ways of viewing themselves, this teacher highlighted and brought them out into the open in a way that makes students feel proud of who they are and which group or groups they may identify with.

In order to make the most of student voice, Mr. Johnson described his process for incorporating student voice into the lesson—

I just do my best to make sure that relevant viewpoints are already on the table so that the starting point is the inclusion of different viewpoints and then ask open-ended questions and give students a variety of formats in which to respond to it, whether they are ranking things, the relative importance of things, expressing something artistically. Basically, I try to get out of the students’ way while empowering them to express themselves to do that.

Teachers explained that some students have had more of a voice in the classroom this year due to the chat feature on Zoom. Mr. Snyder remarked:

We actually get some students that are more bold and to actually express their views to the class in that private manner...that was an unintended consequence of covid..or there are different...programs that will allow you to like, Jamboard or that kind of stuff that you can put those kind of comments up on the screen.

Mr. Snyder felt that the anonymity of online discussion boards or Zoom chats has actually allowed more students to feel comfortable to speak up and have their voices heard. He

went on to describe another example in which he has students make presentations to himself instead of to the whole class because “I think by making them not be presented, it lets the students be a little more free and open in their opinion because they know the only person seeing it is me.” Mr. Snyder wondered aloud how this idea might be used in the future, even when we return back to in-person learning. All teachers discussed the ways in which they make student voices heard in the classroom, but their strategies seemed to be confined to lessons and classroom activities. In other words, students are allowed to express their opinions on the topics that are discussed in class, but they are not asked to share their desires and opinions on topics not covered specifically in a lesson or in an unstructured format.

Challenges of Implementing CRT

Teachers varied in their responses to challenges they face in the classroom and how these challenges impact CRT. Mrs. Evans said that her biggest challenge was class size:

I’m a firm believer that class sizes should be no bigger than like 20, 22 students. Um, and that you can’t positively affect all students in the room when you have more than that....I mean I don’t have classroom management issues but I think feeling like I’m serving all in that moment to the best of my ability, that’s the challenge. Like I don’t feel like I’m giving them what they need.

Similarly, Mr. Snyder discussed his feeling of frustration at not being able to help all students:

I can’t save them all and that’s a really, a frustrating piece for me because I see these kids with this entire future in front of them and they’re rejecting it almost and it’s like wait a minute, I’m literally handing you the keys to your future, I’m giving you all the tools you need to be successful...and you’re going eh, no thank you....and I don’t always know their reasoning for it and that’s just (pause) frustrating and challenging.

Mr. Snyder felt that he had done everything in his power to help students achieve success but believes that some students are just going to fail regardless of the extent of his efforts. Mr. Johnson reiterated this point while discussing teacher burnout and the idea that teachers, especially at the beginning of their career, will try to do too much— “I think for a long time I actually worked a lot more than I needed to.” Instead of stopping to reflect to see if what he was doing was actually working, Mr. Johnson continued to explain that he was “kind of spinning [his] wheels”, never stopping to see if the work he was putting in was actually producing meaningful results. However, both Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Evans talked about the challenge of constantly learning, developing, and changing their pedagogy to meet the needs of a changing student population. Though this can be exhausting and never ending, they considered this to be generally positive, “I think it’s a good challenge...it keeps me on my toes.” The two teachers who embodied this statement showed that being flexible and adapting to student needs was a piece of CRT that they continually practice.

Another important element in CRT is relationship-building. Although all teachers talked about the importance of building relationships with students, it should be noted that even the most experienced teachers found that this can be a struggle. Mr. Snyder gave examples of when he was stereotyped as being racist because he was white. He described his experience as a young teacher: “I was the guy, for the first several years of my profession, that students would come up to me and say well you know you just, you just don’t like me because I’m ‘fill in the minority term here.’” One student accused him of failing her because she was an Asian female. Another student misinterpreted one of his comments on a current events article on farm workers to be racist towards Latinx students. The ensuing conflict with the student and his parent was, in his opinion, because “[the] parent caricatured me as this white male that was clearly anti-Hispanic

because her son is failing my class so it clearly had to be me.” Even though Mr. Snyder said that he struggled with connecting with minority students he still strove to do so: “I had a student tell me one time, but you don’t know who we really are, you don’t understand us, you think you do but you don’t. I’m like well okay, educate me, and he did that.” He went on to say that he envies the teachers at the school site whom connecting with students seems to come naturally. It is unclear whether this is unique to him or if white teachers in general find building relationships with all students to be a challenge.

Finally, teachers described the difficulties of incorporating student voice into the classroom when it came to political and social issues. When asked about how political conversations have gone in the classroom so far, Mr. Snyder talked about how students on the right side of the political spectrum felt that they could not speak their minds:

We also saw the really suppressing of conservative views by students. So if you were conservative, you were the hardcore minority. And you were (pause) picked on in the class. They, you know, people didn’t want to come out as being conservative, they didn’t want to admit to it. Um, they, you know, you got closet conservatism going on because they were fearful of how their points of views are gonna be met by the student population.

Later on in his response, he talks about how to some degree, some Christian students were afraid to share their views because of the association of the right-wing to Christianity in the media. This is not a glaring issue at the school site, but still a cause of concern for some students.

While discussing the 2016 election, Mr. Johnson described the difficulty he had with two students who were “loud” and “obnoxious” on purpose when Donald Trump won the election. He dealt with this behavior by jumping in and moderating class discussions when necessary.

Mrs. Evans made it clear that all voices would be heard but “if a student started to kind of bag on somebody, I’m like wait a minute...let’s not be demeaning, let’s not tear anyone down, let’s not dehumanize.” Setting discussion norms was also a common thread in relation to this question.

Ms. Adams used a process similar to a “talking stick”– “I used to have a thing where I had a little bear (laughs), but the bear worked because if you had the bear you could talk. And they would pass it around...and it really does work.” Teachers had different strategies to handle conversations on more sensitive topics in the classroom, but all teachers admitted that it was something that they sometimes struggle with.

Teacher Criticisms of CRT Professional Development Training

Reluctance to CRT/Teaching for Social Justice

Some teachers have a hard time with the idea of implementing culturally relevant teaching or having open conversations on things like race and politics in the classroom. When asked to think of an example of teachers who were hostile towards elements of social justice and CRT at their school site or at a previous school, Mr. Johnson described his experience working with more politically conservative teachers:

[they] believed that they had a story of America to tell and they were tired of people telling them to also talk about things like slavery and a lot of the other things that formed the backbone of the reform movement, civil rights movements. These things are largely secondary to a story, that is, simply kind of pure and noble and true, um and uh, mostly blemish-free. Um, and they were very kind of defensive about it, um and in ways, I don’t know if you’ve read...*White Fragility?*

The teachers that he described (who are not at the school site where the research was conducted) tended to equate culturally relevant teaching with “promoting a political or social point” as one

teacher stated, implying that there was a secret agenda to pushing CRT in education. In other words, a more *liberal* agenda that may be associated with promoting ideas of diversity and antiracism. Instead of focusing on the aspects of culturally relevant teaching that many of these teachers already do, such as relationship building and seeing the whole student, these teachers only see the practice as coming from a liberal narrative (which, again, is more likely to be associated with practices like social justice). When asked why teachers might feel this way, Mr. Johnson answered, "...the narratives we tell ourselves, the power structures that exist and how we fit into them and how (pause) and just changing that, changing that narrative can feel very frightening." Any change to a narrative that teachers have been very comfortable teaching to students for years can feel like a personal attack. This is problematic because CRT involves including a variety of narratives, even if teachers don't personally hold those beliefs. Depending on how CRT is defined, politics and movements for social change can be a very big component of the practice. For some teachers, especially those who share views that are not mainstream to the rest of the school, their experience is as follows, "I've seen a lot over the years, some were afraid to discuss it [politics] because they're afraid that their views will be too contradictory to that of the students...and so they kind of hide themselves in the closet..." Mr. Snyder went on to say that "one of those concerns people have talking about race, is their fear of the backlash. People call it reverse racism. Racism is racism, let's just get real." In this quote, he conveys the idea that white teachers specifically, may feel that anything they say will be interpreted by students or parents as racist, which they then conclude is "reverse racism". In other words, white teachers think BIPOC are being racist towards *them* because (they believe) BIPOC will automatically conclude that whatever is said is wrong simply because the speaker is white. Yet by assuming there will be a backlash without attempting to actually foster conversations with

students, the teacher is unlikely to actually admit if something that they said was indeed offensive. Moreover, Mr. Snyder was also making generalized assumptions about the reactions of *all* BIPOC students in the class. Thus, this perspective continues to lead to a breakdown of communication because both parties (the teacher and the student/parent) consider the other side to be racist.

Finally, Ms. Adams felt that CRT was irrelevant because she considered elements of CRT to be inherent in the job of teacher, specifically community building:

I think that, that, they're always trying to impose something on the educational system. I, I think that, as teachers we're culturally relevant no matter what. Forced to be in that sense. Because we work with human beings...I feel like being culturally responsive, responsible, I think that's the word I'm going to use, takes everybody. You know? Not only the students, the parents and the community. So there's nothing we can do as educators to change their community. There's nothing we can do that can change what goes on at home.

This quote brings up two significant points about how some teachers may view CRT. First, that CRT in a nutshell is just building relationships with students and the community. While this is correct, this viewpoint leaves out the many other elements of CRT such as student voice, representationally diverse content, explicit SEL teaching and antiracism. Second, it shows that some teachers feel that the issues that students may face at home or in their neighborhoods are not able to be overcome by educators, and to some extent, there is no point in trying.

Critiques of Professional Development

After the local chapter of the NAACP provided the school district with data showing that African American students were being disproportionately suspended, they recommended

mandatory CRT training for all school sites that had the highest number of instances. Training began towards the end of the 2019-2020 school year and continued until the end of this school year in June 2021. Teachers were required to read Zaretta Hammond's book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* and be prepared to discuss the information from the book during the training. While the majority of teachers were on board with the idea of CRT as evident in the interviews, a handful of teachers had very strong negative reactions to the way that the training was being conducted. Overall, teachers felt that the training did not address outside factors such as class size or home life that may impede successful CRT. Out of the four teachers I interviewed, the reaction to training appeared to be split. Two of the teachers (Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Evans) had nothing but praise for Zaretta Hammond's book and found the conversations on the material to be helpful—

Well, I really love the material in the book and I think it's really brought my attention to the fact that when students feel uncomfortable about what's being said or done in the classroom, one of the things that they'll do is to shutdown so they're freeze or they'll fight back or they'll want to get out. And so some of the behaviors that they will act out in class might look like something personal towards the teacher...

Even so, Mrs. Evans went on to say that she would like to see even more practical examples of how CRT can be implemented in the classroom. The following quote from Mr. Snyder sums up the main critique from teachers, "We've asked the right question but we're not using the right method to get there." In addition, open communication between teachers and administration was nonexistent: most teachers felt that professional development on CRT was a good thing but believed that the administration was not presenting the information in a way that teachers learned best.

In the interview with the two teachers who had strong critiques of the training (Mr. Snyder and Ms. Adams), I heard a high level of frustration and even anger because they felt that the once a month, hour long training sessions were a waste of time. Throughout my data collection in January and February, teachers repeatedly made disparaging remarks about the training including, “I thought it was bogus,” “I’ve got pretty strong opinions on this,” “I was so pissed off, I’m sorry. I was so mad at [the PD trainer]. I wanted to leave that meeting so badly,” “it was beyond jarring and was so offensive,” “I was insanely stressed out going into that very first workshop,” and “I was just so stressed and frustrated.” It’s fair to say that these two teachers’ point of view were felt by other teachers based on feedback I heard from others that did not participate in the study. Yet at no point during the training were teachers invited to provide feedback on the training or offer suggestions for how the training might be more effective in helping them to transform their teaching practice. The lack of communication between the two parties—teachers and the facilitators of the training—is another void in communication that affects the implementation of authentic CRT.

One of the main reasons that teachers disliked the workshop was because they felt that they were not given enough examples of what CRT would look like in practice, particularly challenging interactions with students. Mr. Snyder wanted to know, “...how would culturally responsive teachers deal with this, this situation? Okay what would be the reasoning, what would be the angle, how would they approach the subject?” Ms. Adams remarked, “I think it needs to be specific. Very specific. Um, you know, if, if two black kids are calling each other [n-word], what am I supposed to do about it?” The latter example exemplifying how white teachers are unsure of how to handle specific racialized issues that are not pertinent to their racial or cultural

background. They know that this behavior is not appropriate for school, but do not know how to go about disciplining in a way that will not come off as racist.

Some of the white teachers felt like they could not speak their minds during the trainings because of their race. Mr. Snyder shared—

I was really concerned when we got into our project, this um, with this book we've been doing, is that, if you don't know me, I am the visual antithesis of that program. I'm an older, white male, wearing a shirt and tie...I just have that appearance of, of course I'm gonna be racist...I think I'm worried about people mis-assuming and characterizing me in the wrong capacity.

Mr. Snyder did not appear to be against the idea of CRT or participating in training but felt extremely frustrated because he did not feel comfortable asking questions. Instead, he kept his feelings to himself so that he wouldn't be “the angry white guy complaining about the program.”

Ms. Adams felt that the material was offensive. “I mean I'm going to be honest with you with this. I feel as being a Caucasian, um, we're even uh...the examples that [PD trainer] gave us, I didn't see any Caucasians in that example.” The quote above is referencing a video that was shown in a training session that illustrated stereotypes of minority groups. Ms. Adams felt that because Caucasians stereotypes were not included in the video, that it was divisive. She went on to say that she felt offended because “all I'm reading is what I'm not doing and what I should do and they're not telling me how to do it.” The frustration these teachers feel occurs on multiple levels. Not only do white teachers feel they are receiving the message that what they are doing in their classroom is wrong, but they also don't understand how to make significant changes in a culturally relevant way. Equally important, teachers did not feel like their efforts in the classroom to support minoritized students were recognized, “you know, what we need is

examples, what we need is truthful conversations. I don't need to sing a song to my friend, you know." In this quote, Ms. Adams is referencing the welcoming activities that we practice each session. These activities are designed to model how teachers should welcome students into the space and make them feel safe before getting into content. While the teachers don't necessarily disagree with this concept, they feel that in our hour-long session every minute counts, and the time spent completing these activities could be better spent on issues of CRT that have yet to be addressed and are more pressing.

Even though some teachers were frustrated with the training, it was clear that teachers were on board with some ideas of social justice, inherent to authentic CRT. Ms. Adams shared that growing up during the Civil Rights era she was "always on the side of equality...and I protested, I did, and I remember one time I almost got arrested." Even though she believes in most of the basic components of CRT, she doesn't necessarily believe that teachers need to be learning about it through training. For Ms. Adams, training is unlikely to have a significant impact on her students given that there is only so much that teachers can do. Even with a multitude of strategies and maximum effort, unless a change in the community or home life can be achieved, the effect of the teacher on particular students will be very little in her opinion. In addition, Ms. Adams implied that the training should not focus so heavily on race. Towards the end of the interview, she shared "that there are struggle stories in every culture and in every race," implying that the history associated with students' race is irrelevant to teaching them.

Another reason that was given for the frustration towards the training was that it wasn't rigorous enough:

How she's presenting this information, is treating us as if we have no knowledge of the topic, nor have we done our homework. And so she's giving us the review piece...I think it's because she's just expecting people not to have done the work.

Mr. Snyder suggested that the program should be more "teacher-centered" meaning that teachers have more time to discuss the concepts in the book with their colleagues and would be able to ask questions and bring their own experiences to the table.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to answer two central research questions. The first question asked: How do student ideas about education compare to teacher understandings of culturally relevant teaching? Understanding student desires and needs is key to authentic CRT because it allows students to take more independence over their learning experience (Emdin, 2016; Hammond 2014). It is clear that in order for teachers to be more engaged in learning and implementing CRT, specific examples of implementation must be given, and teachers must have more of a voice to express their views and questions on the training and CRT in general. The findings of this study highlight the differences and similarities between student desires and experiences and teacher perceptions of CRT. Student interviews and the focus group highlighted their interest in increased opportunities to share their perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy and indicated that students desired the elements of CRT that the teachers were missing in their practice: a more representative and diverse curriculum, and distinct SEL teaching for students. In contrast to the students' desires for CRT the majority of teachers only mentioned relationship building. Yet at the same time, it was clear that all teachers practiced elements of CRT, whether they were aware of it or not. It was also apparent that some of the challenges that teachers face in

the classroom such as large class sizes and being stereotyped by students can impede successful CRT.

Second, this study aimed to answer this question: How do teachers perceive professional development training on culturally relevant teaching? Teacher frustrations about CRT and training were highlighted during interviews with teachers. The two main reasons why teachers felt the training was ineffective was they thought they were not provided with ways to practically apply CRT concepts to their classrooms and they felt they could not voice their opinions about the training to administration. Moreover, the trainings did not address the specific challenges that teachers identified as barriers to CRT (i.e., large class size and their perception that they are stereotyped by students). Overall, these findings appear to show a gap in understanding between teachers and students and among teachers and administrators. Students do not have the proper avenue to have open and honest conversations about their needs and desires and these needs/desires are not explicitly requested from staff. Teachers did not feel comfortable voicing their opinions on the professional development training and administration was not aware that some teachers were reacting negatively to the required training. These combined findings suggest that in order for authentic CRT to take place at this school site, an open line of communication needs to be created between all parties (students, teachers, and administration). Additionally, the voices of students and teachers must be used to create an action plan that allows for both student and teacher feedback.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings in this study reveal that while students may feel comfortable speaking up at school, the authenticity of those opportunities may be lacking. In other words, how often does student feedback actually lead to tangible change? Currently, students can have lunch with the principal, and many felt that they had at least one teacher on campus whom they felt comfortable talking with. However, when it comes to feedback on curriculum and pedagogy in the classroom, there isn't a forum for students to share. This same experience is highlighted in research from Zion (2020) who documents how opportunities for students to speak openly with staff are limited at the school site she studied. Similar to the findings in the current study, her student focus group showed that students wanted access to representative curriculum and did not feel that if they wanted to make change, they would necessarily be listened to by staff. Zion also argues that, often, students who are invited to share are only the "model students", and the voices of students who need to be heard the most, are commonly left out. In the current study, all students are of course welcome to join student leadership and have lunch with the principal, but students who participate in these opportunities are typically high achieving students or students that are very involved in school culture anyway. It is clear that students who are currently marginalized within the school need more than an open invitation to participate in these opportunities. For students who already feel disenfranchised at school, educators must work proactively to encourage them to speak up and provide them with safe spaces to speak their minds.

Another similarity between the findings from this study and existing research in the academic literature is the importance of building and maintaining relationships with students, which is discussed as a foundational component of CRT (Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). When teachers in this study were asked to define CRT, connecting with students was the

first thing all participants mentioned. When students in this study were asked about their favorite lesson and/or teacher, the majority discussed life lessons or conversations with teachers as being more memorable than academic lessons. This ties back to the idea that while academics are obviously important, what students walk away with at the end of their educational experience is the life and social lessons that they learned from teachers and students, another key idea in CRT (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014). Additionally, feedback from students indicated that teachers who made students feel seen and heard were favorites. Therefore, the findings from this study confirm that many teachers at the school site are practicing at least one component of CRT and meeting one of the needs of students that were expressed in the interviews and focus group.

This study addressed two obstacles to authentic CRT. One of the obstacles that was explored in the literature review was the impact of a white identity on the perception of CRT. In the study from Patton and Jordan (2017), white educators became upset when asked to participate in PD focused on social justice, a critical element of CRT (Emdin, 2016; Hammond 2014). When the PD trainer, who happened to be the new assistant principal, asked the educators to talk about race and implicit biases, teachers became angry. Some said that they were afraid to come into work because the environment was so uncomfortable for them. While the reactions from the teachers in the current study were not as extreme, the idea of white fragility was paralleled in the findings. This idea was illustrated by the two teachers who expressed that they felt they could not speak up during the trainings because of their white identity.

Implications for the Literature

Previous studies on CRT have seldom featured student voices in the research process. Rarely are students asked what they want and what changes they would like to see in the classroom. It was evident in the current study that when asked how school could be improved,

students were unsure how to answer. This implies that this is something they either don't think they have the power to change, have never been asked this before, or a combination of both factors. In the 10th grade focus group, Jack remarked "we should do this again!" and the other student agreed, making it clear that students believe this process is important and worth their time.

In addition, the current study found that despite ongoing efforts to implement CRT, students wished for a more representationally diverse curriculum with characters in books they could identify with or content in history that featured people from their ethnic background or sexual orientation. While students felt racial diversity was somewhat present in classroom materials and content, Alex noted that LGBTQ representation was completely absent in his classes. Students in the focus group also adamantly expressed the need for SEL teaching, beginning from a young age. Jack brought up the idea of a sociology class and discussed the importance of students being taught how to solve problems with peers, so that they can worry less about social conflict and focus more on academics.

Finally, the findings illuminated the high level of frustration some teachers showed towards the training, something the literature has not yet fully explored. The primary issue teachers had with the training was that they felt they were not given specific examples of how to implement CRT or specific strategies to tackle sensitive issues like race in the classroom. In addition, some white teachers specifically discussed how they felt the training was offensive to white people or that their white identity prevented them from sharing their opinion or feedback for fear of being stereotyped. These findings indicate that in order for authentic CRT to be implemented at the school-wide level, it is imperative to include the voice of teachers when designing PD. Just as teachers need to be sensitive to the needs and feelings of their students,

facilitators of PD on CRT must take into account the lived experiences of teachers to create relevant PD sessions.

Implications for Practice and Policy

At the end of the day, education and culturally relevant teaching are about providing all students with the best learning experiences possible. In order to strive for this goal, teachers should ask for student feedback and occasionally take the role of the student, letting the students share with teachers different strategies for how they think they should be taught (Emdin, 2016). To do so, teachers can find frequent opportunities to briefly ask for student feedback or suggestions on a particular lesson or unit. The findings of the current study also suggest that teachers should be mindful when selecting instructional tools to ensure they show an array of different backgrounds and perspectives, including those that are not frequently seen such as LGBTQ representation. To meet students' desire for SEL in the classroom, teachers should incorporate team and community building in the classroom. They could do so by explicitly teaching students how to work in groups, reminding them how to communicate with each other respectfully, and by modeling problem-solving skills they can use when conflict arises during group work. The goal would be that hopefully the SEL teaching in the classroom would translate to social situations outside of the classroom.

On a broader scale, schools should create student forums, both in-person and possibly online, for students who are scared to share their thoughts publicly (as was suggested by one of the teachers in their interview). The forum would be different than student leadership/government for example, because it would be specifically for students to share feedback and desires for content and pedagogy with teachers they trust. The format could follow what Christopher Emdin calls "cogens", where students have cogenerative dialogues

(collaborative discussions) to come up with ideas for change in the classroom or at the school site. Students then bring this information to teachers who can share the information with staff. Students that feel comfortable speaking with staff, need to be encouraged to join staff spaces to share that information directly. This should happen at multiple points in the school year so that teachers and administration will be continuously receiving feedback from students to inform teaching and/or school culture. Allowing struggling students and BIPOC students to voice their feedback when they have been systematically silenced in education and in political and social spheres is an important part of authentic CRT (Kendi, 2019). It might also be a way to heal the void in communication between students and teachers and combat institutional and systemic racism in this country.

Additionally, schools should strive for bottom-up professional development, particularly on sensitive topics like race and discrimination. The findings suggest that an outsider coming into the school to teach teachers how to teach, will typically not be as well received as a staff member from inside the school. One reason for this could be that an outsider may be unable to connect with teachers in a way that a staff member at the school site would be able to. With CRT, knowing your students' backgrounds and establishing a relationship with them is key to successful learning. This concept is no different with teachers. Research from McCormick et al. (2013) concluded that a CRT book study program was successful because teachers liked being able to work in small groups and learn with and from their colleagues. While the PD training at the school site in the current study utilized a book study approach, small groups were not employed, which may be one reason why the training was not effective.

Second, teachers may feel reluctant to ask for clarification or to ask questions if the training is led by an outsider. As was evident in the findings of this study, two white teachers felt

that their questions and feedback would be taken the wrong way because the presenter didn't know them or their background. Providing teachers with effective CRT training they are receptive to is crucial to CRT and education for social justice. Teachers need to be better equipped to understand their BIPOC students and implement strategies that meet the needs of a diverse array of students (Gay, 2010). Authentic CRT training should allow teachers to tackle issues of race in the classroom and create a safe, equitable space for all. Therefore, educators who lead PD trainings on CRT should be aware of white fragility and be equipped with strategies to address issues that arise when white educators react negatively to these conversations on race and racism.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

Limitations

One of the most obvious limitations of the study was the covid-19 pandemic. All recruitment and interviews had to occur via email, Google Classroom, and Zoom. The biggest challenge was recruiting students. Students at this school site take seven classes, and understandably so, students did not want to spend any more time on their computer than they had to. This made the number of participants significantly smaller than I would have liked. The majority of students who volunteered for the study were students with strong grades, meaning that the student interviews and focus group did not necessarily include the perspectives of struggling students. Only two of the students were BIPOC so the percentage of students that were interviewed was not representative of the percentage of BIPOC students at the school site. I also would have liked to interview more BIPOC teachers and more teachers in general, to explore the theme of white identity in teachers and how it impacts their perception of PD training on CRT. This was another perspective that was missing from the study. Finally, the results may

not be generalizable to all school sites, as PD on CRT varies based on the school and district meaning that teacher reactions may not be the same. Students at other school sites may have very different needs and desires (as well as different suggestions for improvement) than students at other school sites.

Furthermore, as a teacher at the school site, my position likely affected the way I asked my interview questions. I was very careful to word my questions in such a way that I didn't offend any of my colleagues. Originally, I wanted to talk about white fragility, but I struggled coming up with interview questions that would ask teachers about it directly. I am a strong believer in CRT, so teachers may not have been as honest as they could have been, knowing that I fully support the pedagogical approach. Teachers may have also assumed that because my topic was CRT, that I was looking for specific answers and that I was onboard with the PD training occurring at the school site. This may have prevented other teachers who disagreed with the training to volunteer to be interviewed in this study.

Directions for Future Research

To expand upon the findings gathered in the current study, future research should include a larger sample size of both teachers and students. Participants should also be more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. When classes return to in-person, I would highly recommend that recruitment occur in-person as well. If teachers have particular students in mind who they know would benefit from having their voice heard, it would be easier to nudge them into attending a focus group or at least participating in an interview. Multiple focus groups over the span of several weeks would also encourage a larger and more diverse sample and allow students to come back after reflecting on the questions to see if they have any topics they want to expand upon.

While qualitative research is great for collecting student voice, another suggestion for future research would be to utilize a mixed methods approach where an online survey is sent out to all students at the school. This way, the researcher would be able to get the perspectives of students who may be too shy or unmotivated to join the focus group. A survey may also give students more time to reflect on their answer than an in-person focus group or interview.

In addition, teachers expressed that they liked the idea of CRT and a PD training overall, but all wished for more specific strategies and some wanted an inside trainer. Classroom observations of existing pedagogy would provide more data to better understand the relationship between teacher perceptions of CRT and the effectiveness of CRT in the classroom. This study discussed white fragility in educators, but future research should explore this topic more in depth in order to develop different strategies to address it.

Related to white fragility in teachers, future research could address white fragility in students. When conversations of race and discrimination come up in the classroom, white students may feel uncomfortable sharing their opinions on the topic. I am currently involved as a participant in a study related to the idea of white fragility in students. The researchers plan to pilot a history curriculum that aims to fight white supremacy. The idea is to provide white students with positive white role models in history that were involved in social justice and committed to intersectionality. The goal of this research is to help white students to be more open-minded to topics like race and racism.

Conclusion

I chose this topic to challenge myself to dig deeper into CRT, and to find the nuances in an area of education that I already know a lot about. The purpose of this study was to find ways to remove barriers to authentic CRT, therefore helping to improve education for students who

struggle with academics and do not feel seen and heard at school. Additionally, my goal was to make my school site and the educational system better for students and teachers.

This research has opened my eyes to the notion that students have many insightful ideas, and many educators would never know until they explicitly ask students for feedback. Many students have been conditioned since elementary school to do exactly as the teacher says and never question that logic (Freire, 2018). Without allowing and encouraging students to use their agency to speak up and make their educational experience better, it is unlikely that it will happen. As educators, we need to encourage them to do so by creating student-led spaces.

The study also brought to light teachers' true feelings on CRT. While I was not surprised by the reaction of many of my white colleagues to the PD training, I was not expecting the level of frustration. Their feedback highlighted the need for more effective PD training that provides specific examples and makes teachers feel comfortable asking questions and engaging with the trainer. Improving PD training on CRT can make for better teachers and therefore a better educational experience for students.

These findings are heartening because they show that students may hold some of the answers to improving education and we should let them share in the leadership process. Schools need to work to make spaces for students and teachers to be open and honest with each other—eliminating the disconnect and “void” in communication so that students, teachers, and administration can work together to make changes that will benefit all.

References

- Adichie, C. (2009). *The danger of the single story* [TED Talk]. YouTube.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>
- Byrd, C. (2016). Does culturally relevant teaching work? An examination from student perspectives. *SAGE Open*, 6(3), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016660744>
- California Department of Education. (2017). *California School Dashboard*. Retrieved April 24th, 2021, from <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>
- Charteris, J. & Smardon, D. (2019). Democratic contribution or information for reform? Prevailing and emerging discourses of student voice. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(6), 1-18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v44n6.1>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (5th ed.). SAGE Publishing.
- Dee Smiley, A. & Helfenbein, R. J. (2011). Becoming Teachers: The Payne Effect. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 13(1), 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2011.548177>
- DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so far for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon press.
- Emdin, C. (2016). *For white folks who teach in the hood...and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Beacon Press.
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. Ramos, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic.
 (Original work published 1970)
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Teacher's College Press.

- Gierhart, C. K. (2019). *The impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on the academic achievement of high school students in an alternative art class* [Master's thesis, St. Catherine University]. Retrieved from Sophia, the St. Catherine University repository website: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/maed/300>
- Hajisoteriou, C. & Angelides, P. (2020). Efficiency versus social justice? Teachers' role in the epoch of globalisation. *Education, Citizenship & Social Justice*, 15(3), 274-289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197919852564>
- Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.
- Hines, M. T., III. (2016). The embedded ness of white fragility within white pre-service principals' reflections on white privilege. *Critical Questions in Education*, 7(2), 130-145. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1104686>
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Irby, D. J., Hall, H. B., & Hill, M. L. (2013). Schooling teachers, schooling ourselves: Insights and reflections from teaching K-12 teachers how to use hip-hop to educate students. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 15(1), 1-18. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1105068>
- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. Penguin Random House.
- Kinloch, V. & San Pedro, T. (2013). The space between listening and storying: Foundations for projects in humanization. In D. Paris & M. T. Winn (Eds.), *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities* (pp. 21-42). SAGE Publishing.

- Larson, K. E., Pas, E. T., Bradshaw, C. P., Rosenberg, M. S., & Day-Vines, N. L. (2018). Examining how proactive management and culturally responsive teaching relate to student behavior: Implications for measurement and practice. *School Psychology Review*, 47(2), 153-156. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17105/SPR-2017-0070.V47-2>
- Masko, A. L. & Bloem, P. L. (2017). Teaching for equity in the milieu of white fragility: Can children's literature build empathy and break down resistance? *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 19(1-2), 55-67. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1247367>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publishing.
- McCormick, T. M., Eick, C. J., & Womack, J.S. (2013). Culturally responsive teaching: Awareness and professional growth through a school-university collaboration. *School-University Partnerships*, 6(1), 6-14. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1008672>
- Mellom, P. J., Straubhaar, R., Balderas, C., Ariail, M., & Portes, P.R. (2018) "They come with nothing:" How professional development in a culturally responsive pedagogy shapes teacher attitudes towards Latino/a English language learners. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 71, 98-107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.12.013>
- Patton, L. D., & Jordan, J. L. (2017). It's not about you, it's about us: A black woman administrator's efforts to disrupt white fragility in an urban school. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 20(1), 80-91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458916689127>
- Payne, Ruby K. (2003). *Understanding and working with students and adults from poverty*. aha! Process, Inc. <https://www.ahaprocess.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Understanding-Poverty-Ruby-Payne-Poverty-Series-I-IV.pdf>

- Pollock, M. (Ed.). (2008). *Everyday antiracism: Getting real about race in school*. The New Press.
- Prier, D. (2012). *Culturally relevant teaching: Hip-hop pedagogy in urban schools*. Peter Lang Inc.
- Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409-427. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>
- Vavrus, M. (2008). Culturally responsive teaching. In Good, T.L. (Ed.), *21st Century Education: A Reference Handbook* (vol. 2) (pp. 49-57), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.
- Sirrakos, G., Jr. & Fraser, B. J. (2016). A cross-national mixed-method study of reality pedagogy. *Learning Environments Research*, 20(2), 153-174. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-016-9220-y>
- Zion, S. (2020). Transformative student voice: Extending the role of youth in addressing systemic marginalization in U.S. schools. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 20(1), 32-43. <https://meridian.allenpress.com/mvedel/article-abstract/20/1/32/441035/Transformative-Student-Voice-Extending-the-Role-of?redirectedFrom=PDF>

Appendix A:
Student Interview Questions

- How would you describe the purpose of school?
- Think about your favorite teacher. Why were they your favorite? What did they do or didn't do that made you enjoy their class so much?
- Do you see yourself represented in the content that you are taught? For example, in English class, do you read books or texts with characters that look like you?
- How do you learn best? How are your teachers meeting the needs of different learners in your classes? (i.e., visual learners, auditory learners, physical learners, etc.)
- Do you feel like your voice is heard and respected in the classroom? At the school? Why or why not?
- Describe a lesson that had an impact on you (i.e., a lesson that you will never forget). What made it so memorable?
- Describe a time when a teacher inspired you to make a difference in your life or in the community.
- How can teachers make your educational experience better? Think about the content that you learn and the way that teachers deliver that content.
- What would an increase in student voice and participation look like at school?
- If you were principal, what steps would you take to make school better for all students?
- Finally, do you have anything else that you want teachers or admin to know in order to make your school experience better?

Appendix B:
Teacher Interview Questions

- How did you get into teaching?
- What are the most challenging aspects of teaching?
- What are the best parts of teaching?
- Briefly, what is your teaching philosophy?
- What do you know about culturally relevant teaching? How would you define it?
- Describe a lesson or unit that you or your department created to empower students and make them feel like their voice mattered.
- What is the most important life skill(s) that students should graduate with it?
- How do you think the current political climate is impacting students?
- Do you think some teachers struggle with discussing social or political issues in class?
Without naming the teacher, can you think of an example?
- How do you address political or social issues in the classroom in a way that makes all students feel comfortable sharing their opinions?
- Why do you think some teachers are uncomfortable talking about race and ethnicity in the classroom or in professional development?
- How can teachers connect with their students of color and make them feel seen and heard in the classroom?
- How do you feel about the current professional development training on culturally relevant teaching?

Appendix C:**Table 1 Student Demographics and Pseudonyms**

Table 1 Student demographics and pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Grade	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Jack*	10th	Male	White
Alex*	10th	Male	White
Brianna	10th	Female	African American
Courtney	8th	Female	Latina
Gavin	8th	Male	White

*students who participated in the focus group