

# Culturally Responsive Teaching in Practice: Exploring English Language Arts Classrooms That Serve Ethnically, Linguistically, and Culturally Diverse Students

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Culturally Responsive Teaching in Practice: Exploring English Language Arts Classrooms That  
Serve Ethnically, Linguistically, and Culturally Diverse Students

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Chair: Dr. Heidi Hallman

Date Approved: April 09, 2020

## **Abstract**

Public schools in the United States are witnessing an increase in the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of their student bodies. In addition, many of the students do not share the same cultural backgrounds and worldviews as their teachers. Since education is mainly influenced by the dominant culture in society, there is potential for incongruity between the expectations of the students and those of the school. Over the course of one semester, the researcher conducted a qualitative multi-case study to investigate how three English language arts teachers, who mainly teach English learners in an urban high school located in the Midwest United States, incorporated culturally and linguistically relevant and responsive standards-based instructional practices in their taught curriculum. The guiding research questions included: What is the teachers' understanding of culturally relevant education? How do the teachers incorporate culturally relevant education in standards-based instructional practices in their classrooms? What motivates teachers to engage in culturally relevant education? Data analysis consisted of within case and across case analysis in order to answer the research questions. The findings indicated that teacher agency played a big role in how teachers not only prepared themselves to teach students with diverse cultures and languages, but also how they incorporated culturally relevant education in the standards-based curriculum. In addition, among English learners with diverse cultures and languages, sociopolitical consciousness can mean being change agents at school and at home through learning English, volunteering, and providing translation and interpreter services for their families and communities.

## **Dedication**

For Lance, Nia, and Zini: Thank you for your extraordinary patience.

To Larry and Jean: Thank you for your support and encouragement.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Owing to migration trends, the composition of the student population in schools in the United States has been changing gradually over a century with diversity becoming more and more prevalent (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018; Kumar et al., 2019). Specifically, the demographics have been changing from majority White students to majority nonwhite students (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016; Sharma & Christ, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), in the years between 2000 and 2015, enrollment of white students decreased from 61 to 41 percent. The enrollment of black students also saw a decline from 17 to 15 percent. However, there was an uptake in the enrollment of both the Hispanic students from 16 to 26 percent and the Asian/Pacific Islander students from 4 to 5 percent. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) further confirms this trend by projecting that by the year 2024, the composition of U.S. public schools will be as follows: 46 percent of the students will be White, 29 percent will be Hispanic, 6 percent will be Asian/Pacific Islander, and 15 percent will be Black. The expectation is that this trend will continue.

Therefore, as diversity in schools increases each year, especially in early childhood education classrooms, we find that fewer students are served by teachers who look like them and whose cultural backgrounds are similar to theirs (Horvat & Pezzetti, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In fact, the United States Department of Education estimates that the teaching workforce in K-12 schools has remained predominantly White with the current numbers of White teachers resting at 82 percent. Therefore, the teaching workforce in many urban schools does not mirror the student population, so there is a need for a different approach to teaching diverse students (Fitchett et al., 2012; Lin & Bates, 2014). Carter Andrews et al. (2019) point to studies that show that students of color are more successful academically and enjoy positive

learning experiences when they see themselves represented in the teaching workforce. In addition, the students are more likely to feel welcome, affirmed and understood at school when teachers utilize culturally responsive teaching strategies (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). In fact, some studies have shown a link between student academic achievement and the cultural backgrounds of their teachers, especially when teachers view students through a cultural stereotypical lens that negatively influences their instructional practices as well as their expectations for the students (Lin & Bates, 2014).

This dissertation explores the teaching practices of teachers working in some of the most diverse classrooms in the United States. These classrooms are comprised of English learners with diverse and, sometimes, multiple cultures and languages. This study explores how the teachers, whose cultural backgrounds differ greatly from those of their students, are leveraging their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and experiences to enhance their learning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Culture influences everything, including teaching and learning, and teachers are not immune to those influences. Consequently, teachers' cultural experiences shape their beliefs, predictions and expectations about what and how their students learn, which in turn guides their planning and implementation of the curriculum (Bomer, 2017). More often than not, that curriculum reflects the interests of the dominant culture, and diverse students of color, including immigrants into the United States, do not often see themselves reflected in the curriculum (Bomer, 2017). Therefore, when schools prioritize white middle-class literacy practices and ways of knowing in the name of social mobility and assimilation, they end up excluding students with diverse language and cultural practices that differ from the dominant US culture (Symons & Ponzio, 2019). This happens because, intentionally or unintentionally, schools continue to expect

students and families from ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds to conform to the “white, middle-class, Eurocentric norms and values of schools, reinforcing a power imbalance between home and school” (Horvat & Pezzetti, 2019, p. 40). When the needs of diverse minority students are not met, then they are likely to suffer academically.

A likely consequence of the disconnect between school and student expectations is reflected in student academic performance, a subject that has dogged the education community for years. Darling-Hammond (2009) argues that the academic success of one group in the United States translates into the success of the whole society and, therefore, there is a need to close the achievement gap for the good of all. Typically, academically underachieving students may fall in one or all of the following categories: they do not adequately speak the school’s dominant language, they are grouped as belonging to a low socioeconomic status, and they have traditionally been denied educational and social opportunities (Cummins et al., 2015).

Much of the research on social-cultural influences on learning has been driven, first, by a need to explain and attempt to address the academic achievement gap that minority groups experience in the United States and, secondly, by a need to view minority cultures, not from a deficit-driven perspective, but from a resource-driven perspective (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Paris, 2012).

In fact, one of the most difficult and challenging tasks for educational policy makers and professionals is the reduction or eradication of the education gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006) or the achievement gap as it is commonly referred to in relation to standardized tests and graduation rates among other measures of academic success (Howard, 2010). There have been numerous attempts to address this problem with little success (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Howard (2010) argues that whereas some researchers maintain that achievement gaps reflect the socio-economic

gaps in a given society, others attribute them to early access to pre-K education because early access to educational opportunities has been tied to the likelihood of higher academic achievement (Thompson, 2015).

Another factor that negatively impacts student learning is when the approaches teachers use are not congruent with students' lived experiences. Most classroom practice does not reflect the relationship between students' cultural and social life and what they learn at school, meaning that many teachers are not tapping into the wealth of prior knowledge that students bring into the classroom (Thirumurthy & Szecsi, 2012). For students of minority ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, this means that they have no continuum of learning because they have to continuously shift between the school's dominant culture and the home culture. In many cases, this disconnect puts the students at risk academically (Thirumurthy & Szecsi, 2012).

And the risk is not just reflected in academics; it is also reflected in behavioral expectations at school. When there is a disconnect between the students' cultural norms and behaviors (which are derived from their daily lives) and the behavioral expectations of the school, confrontations are likely to occur (Irvin, 2010). Moreover, students of color sometimes feel that their European-American teachers neither understand nor honor their cultural backgrounds, including behaviors (Weinstein et al., 2004). This can lead to students acting out at school, which then results in school suspensions and loss of instructional time.

Teacher beliefs also play a role in the academic achievement of diverse students. It is critical that, instead of viewing students of color, especially those from low income backgrounds, as deficient or lacking or problematic, teachers adopt "an appreciative stance" that seeks to both acknowledge the value and resources those students bring into the classroom and to create spaces where those resources can be sustained, challenged, and harnessed (Bomer, 2017). A way to

achieve this is through empathy. Warren and Hotchkins (2015) define empathy as “understanding life through the eyes of the individuals for whom empathy is meant to benefit” (p. 286). Empathy is the key to caring enough to make a difference in addressing the educational needs of ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students. Teachers who do not share the same cultural backgrounds as their students would especially benefit from empathy because it would require them to try to understand other people’s perspectives and experiences (Warren and Hotchkins, 2015). Being empathetic would also translate into teachers taking up issues of social justice and advocating for their students. Teachers would be at the forefront of recognizing, considering, and addressing learning barriers that their students might encounter (Pantic & Carr, 2017). It is therefore important that teacher training and in-service professional development addresses teacher beliefs about diverse students and seek to aim to change beliefs that might disadvantage students who come from backgrounds that differ significantly from those of their teachers with regard to culture, race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and language (Mellom et al., 2018).

### **English Learners**

There is no more convincing illustration of how diverse the U.S. classrooms are becoming than looking at English language learner populations in schools. There are about 5 million English learners in the United states, the majority of whom, about 71 percent, were born in the United States (Sugarman, 2018). Generally, most English learners are Spanish speaking, but speakers of other languages are also becoming prevalent (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). In fact, although the percentage varies from state to state, the nationwide number of parents who speak a language other than English at home is fifty-nine percent (Park et al., 2018). The Migration Policy Institute estimates that almost one third of children under the age of eight

entering schools in the United States have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English, and many parents “have varied countries of origin, races and ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses” (Park et al., 2018). That said, the expectation would be that the students’ backgrounds and native language literacy feature prominently in their education where dual language education programs are utilized to “develop students’ oral and written proficiency in English and a partner language, academic content knowledge, and cross-cultural competence” (Sugerman, 2018, p. 4). However, this is not the case as most schools use the English only approach thus stifling the development of other languages the students might speak in addition to English.

One of the likely consequences of not intentionally addressing the needs of English learners is that the achievement gap will continue to increase (Good et al., 2010). Sometimes, English learners are misdiagnosed as special education students for several reasons, namely, a lack of language and literacy support provided to the student by the school; the use of assessment tools mainly designed for mainstream English speakers and are therefore not accurate determinants of students’ learning; and the evaluator’s lack of consideration and utilization of the students’ linguistic, social, and cultural assets (Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011; Yuan & Jiang, 2019). Were these factors to be considered, they would lead to different outcomes in favor of the English learners.

The ability to speak, understand, and function in the language of instruction is a factor that influences student learning. English learners, “whether newcomers to the United States or from generations of heritage language speakers, they are disadvantaged if assessment, evaluation, and the curriculum do not make allowances for their distinctive differences” (Lenski et al., 2006). Teachers can ameliorate the students’ difficulties with learning if they are deliberate

in taking into account students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the classroom so that students are more likely to experience greater academic success at school (Aronson and Laughter, 2016). The deliberate acts include modifying content as well as assessments so that they are compatible with and relevant to the cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and life experiences of the students (Allison & Rehm, 2007; Lenski et al., 2006)

Alford (2001) points out that one of the challenges English learners have to contend with when they join the United States' education system is unfamiliarity with the historical, social and cultural issues of the country. This leaves them feeling lost in the classroom, and they might not have the language skills to ask for help or clarification. Another challenge that English learners encounter stems from a culture of learning where they do not question the authority of a text (Alford, 2001) and regard the views expressed in a classroom text as absolute and irrefutable. Therefore, in addition to all else they are learning, English learners have to also learn how to question the credibility of a text.

Another challenge English learners face relates to methods of teaching and learning employed in classrooms in the United States. Whereas many diverse students, including English learners, come from cultures where community, not individualism, is extolled, when they encounter the American culture where individualism is esteemed, a clash of cultures results. The individualism prevalent in the American culture is reflected in the education system where each student is expected to demonstrate mastery of content on an individual basis, and this applies even to group work where each student “must still display evidence of individual work and demonstrate individual mastery” (Decapua & Marshall, 2015, p. 358).

For some English learners, learning a new way of life and a new way of schooling in a new country are not the only challenges they have to contend with. A lack of formal education

further compounds the challenges of English learners because some of them come to the United States as refugees whose education was interrupted by turmoil in their native countries (Aronson & Laughter, 2016) and had to subsequently be relocated to another country (sometimes multiple countries). All these issues impact the learning of English learners and teachers need to consider them when working with the students.

In a study where Good, Masewicz, and Vogel (2010) asked Hispanic parents what they thought their children needed to succeed in school, the parents' response was as follows:

[S]chools must embrace and respect the culture of the families they serve. Culture clashes appeared to undermine the expectations and hopes teachers and parents had for students. There were distinct differences in how teachers and parents viewed their roles in the development of students. Parents entrusted their children to the school but did not feel that they could trust the school. (336)

Therefore, given the growing numbers of English learners, there is a need for teachers to become knowledgeable about not only the cultural backgrounds of students (Allison & Rehm, 2007), but also their religious, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds (Hansen-Thomas & Chennapragada, 2018; Lenski et al, 2006). In other words, teachers need to be cognizant of all components of diversity in all classrooms, especially in English learner classrooms (Johnson & Chang, 2012). To accomplish that, teachers have to take into account what influences student learning as well as what students bring into the learning spaces as they walk into schools. However, current teaching models are inadequate for addressing culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, and therefore, teachers do not leverage the lived experiences and home languages of their students (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). Teachers who go into the teaching profession with the intention of viewing their students' cultures and languages as



assets to be used in the classroom are in the minority and may not get the support they need from their colleagues (Skerrett et al., 2018). And even teachers who are intent on leveraging their students' backgrounds, cultures and languages must find ways to work around school policies (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019) that may be a hindrance.

The reality is that many teachers are hesitant to engage in culturally responsive teaching because they lack the know-how, experience and support (Myers, 2017; Piazza et al., 2015). Furthermore, when it comes to English learners, sometimes teachers feel that they are not equipped with the tools they need to serve the students' cultural, emotional, and academic needs (Good et al., 2010). To counter these challenges, especially for the sake of English learners and minority students, there is a need for equitable educational experiences for all students, which will require the participation of all stakeholders (including policy makers), provision of professional development on effective practices for teaching diverse students, and expansion of collaboration opportunities for teachers to learn from each other (Bonner et al., 2018). This is where targeted professional development to prepare teachers for diverse English learners comes in handy.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Given that many schools in the United States are becoming more and more diverse with the passage of time and the trend is likely to continue (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), it is imperative that schools recognize this fact and address it. The diversity is most prevalent in urban areas where we find minority populations, including immigrants (Toppo & Overberg, 2016). Of these minority and immigrant populations, many are students who attend schools in their urban communities. When these students go to school, many of them encounter teachers who look very different from them, speak a language different from what they are used to, and

execute teaching and learning in a manner foreign to what they were used to. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the practices of teachers who interact with students from both minority and immigrant backgrounds in English learner classrooms with the hope of learning from their standards-based instructional strategies.

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the teachers' understanding of culturally relevant education?
2. How do the teachers incorporate culturally relevant education in standards-based instructional practices in their classrooms?
3. What motivates teachers to engage in culturally relevant education?

### **Overview of Method and Theory**

This is a qualitative case study as it is concerned with studying the experiences, practices, understandings, meanings, and interpretations of the practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of three participants working in a large urban school district. This is a descriptive case study of three teachers who are implementing culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. It is also referred to as a collective or multi-case study because the same concepts are investigated in all the cases in order to represent different perspectives of the same issue (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The collective case study approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the same phenomenon practiced by various participants and also provided the researcher with an opportunity to utilize “the logic of replication” (Cresswell, 2012, p. 99). Because the purpose of a case study is “to investigate a bounded system” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 97), this case study was bounded around the teaching practices of three English language arts teachers who taught English language learners within a standards-based curriculum.

Data for the study was collected over the span of one semester. The methods for data collection included multiple interviews with participants, multiple participant observations, and field notes. Data analysis involved transcription of interview and observation recordings, engaging in multiple line by line within-case analysis (Jones et al., 2014) for all three cases in search for recurring themes. In addition, this qualitative case study compared and contrasted the individual cases against each other for an across-cases analysis (Jones et al., 2014) in order to capture the overall picture of the phenomenon under study.

Two theoretical frameworks were utilized in designing the study - from research and interview questions to data analysis. The first theoretical framework is the culturally relevant education (CRE) framework. Aronson and Laughter (2016) adopted the term culturally relevant education (CRE) to refer to the synthesis of Ladson-Billing's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy and Gay's (2002) culturally responsive teaching. The synthesis resulted in the formulation of four markers of culturally relevant educators. These markers are student centered and address areas such as the attainment of academic skills and concepts, critical reflection, cultural competence, and advocacy for social change.

The second theoretical framework is the model of teacher agency as understood by Biesta et al. (2015). The authors argue that the achievement of agency is dependent on three different factors, namely, iterational factors (life histories or biographies and one's professional experiences), projective factors (future perspectives and aspirations), and practical-evaluative factors that are influenced by the first and second factors.

### **Significance of the Study**

Most previous studies in culturally relevant or responsive teaching have examined teacher instructional practices in schools or classrooms where students from one minority group

were the majority (Au, 2005). This study is significant in that it adds to the relatively smaller body of knowledge that examines how culturally responsive educational practices are implemented in classrooms where multiple and diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds are represented. The focus is on English learner classrooms in an urban setting because such classrooms are the settings in which one is most likely to find various groups of diverse minority students. Since culturally relevant education strategies are useful for teaching minority populations, it is important to study how teachers of English learners, of their own volition, are utilizing the tenets of culturally relevant education to incorporate their students' cultural experiences in an educational setting that mandates teachers to use standards based instructional practices. In addition, this researcher is yet to find a previous study that investigates the implementation of culturally responsive teaching through the lenses of the teacher agency achievement model (Biesta et al., 2015) and the culturally responsive educational framework - a framework that combines the characteristics of both culturally responsive teaching (Gay 2010) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The results of the study will add to the body of knowledge examining how and why teachers implement culturally relevant education practices in ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse classrooms.

### **Organization of the Study**

Following the introduction to this study in chapter one, in chapter two, I include a review of current literature and the different terminologies used to refer to culturally responsive teaching. In addition, the review examines the various sub-texts in the field with a specific focus on English learners. In this chapter, I discuss further, in detail, the theoretical frameworks

underpinning the study, namely, the culturally relevant education framework (Aronson & Laughter, 2016) and the teacher agency achievement model (Biesta et al., 2015).

In chapter three, a discussion of the research design and methodology ensues. A discussion of the methodology, researcher positionality, research context is followed by a discussion about sampling and data collection. Thereafter, data analysis as well as validity and trustworthiness are discussed in detail. In chapter four, the study's findings are discussed and answers to the research questions are provided. In the following and final chapter, the findings are discussed and situated in the body of existing research. In addition, limitations and implications for practice are discussed as well as suggestions for further study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Role of Culture in Learning**

Culture, which is dynamic, interactive, and evolving, offers stability and direction in people's lives. In its dynamism and fluidity, culture, especially among young people, is highly organic, merging the new and the old as young people make sense of their worlds and lives (Alim & Paris, 2017). Culture here refers to a “dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others” (Gay, 2010, p. 9). As part of our upbringing, cultural norms are ingrained in us from the moment we are born, essentially recruiting us into specific cultural groups where we become members.

Hollie (2018) uses the phrase ‘rings of culture’ to refer to the different cultural identities, distinct from racial identity, that any one person may belong to. Hollie adds that these identities relate to age, orientation (sexual), gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, and given that students will belong to each of these intersecting rings of culture, culturally and linguistically responsive educators should validate and affirm their students’ ethnocultural behaviors.

In addition to the rings of culture, Hollie (2018) also discusses the three layers of culture that educators should pay attention to. The layers include the surface layer (the most recognizable because it involves such identifiers as food, clothing and others), the shallow layer (referring to unspoken rules such as concepts of time, courtesy, and non-verbal behavior among others), and finally, the deep level (where one finds unconscious rules that govern issues such as how people determine their concepts of self and their attitudes towards problem-solving). As members of those cultures, we become socialized in particular ways.

It is unquestionable that children grow up in multiple contexts that they learn to negotiate (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016; Horvat & Pezzetti, 2019), and children use these contexts to learn and try to make sense of the world around them using the tools provided to them by the society and culture they live in (Gauvain, 2005). For example, in addition to their ethnic cultures, many young people, irrespective of race or ethnicity, consider themselves to be part of the hip-hop culture. These young people develop an affinity to this culture as they interact with each other as peers in school settings. In addition to hip-hop, the linguistic repertoires of young people play a large role in their identities and social agency and should, therefore, be nurtured and sustained in schools (Bucholt et al., 2017). Educators accomplish this when they are attentive to young people's dynamic, multidimensional, and intersectional interpretations of culture (Alim & Paris, 2017).

Children start the process of socialization at a very tender age. The role of socialization, which happens through education, is to teach people how to belong and function in the society (Ballantine et al., 2017). This education is both formal and informal. Through informal education, children become intricately connected to the social system and the culture they grow up in. Informal education, which begins even before a child has set foot in a school, happens through the family, friends, and everyone in the child's orbit, including the media (Vygotsky, 1978).

Therefore, all students have within them funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and since no student walks into a classroom devoid of knowledge, educators should create spaces that allow that knowledge to emerge and prosper (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019). Freire (2009) argues that it is not for the educators to impose their views and opinions on their students, instead, teachers should engage in dialogue with the students in order to understand their

worldview irrespective of their backgrounds because the worldview of students from minority cultures is just as important as that of students from the dominant culture. Approaching cultural diversity from this inclusive asset-based perspective embraces culture as a resource that can be useful in the classroom. Students' cultural heritage should be viewed as social and cultural capital that is instrumental in student academic success (Strayhorn, 2010). In this case, Strayhorn argues, social capital refers to "instrumental, productive, relationships or networks" (p. 309) and cultural capital refers to the "high-status linguistic and cultural competencies" (p. 309) that students inherit from their families, peers, friends, and other members of their communities.

In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) opposed traditional views of learning that assumed that a student did not have anything to offer to the learning process and rather viewed the student as a receptacle a teacher pours knowledge into. Since learning is the process by which we "acquire not only skills and knowledge, but values, attitudes, and emotional reactions" (Omrod, 1999, p. 3), it is also "a socially mediated process and is related to students' cultural experiences" (Irvin, 2010, p. 58). Learning is heavily influenced by the cultural norms and practices of the family and the community to which the family belongs. Therefore, by the time a child goes to school, the child has already been socialized in a certain way. This is what forms the child's frame of reference. This is true of both the teachers and the students, and these frames of reference influence the behavior of all concerned. When the frames of reference collide, conflict ensues, especially if a student attends a school whose expectations in and out of the classroom are very different from those the student grew up with.

Gay (2010) argues that culture cannot be divorced from education because "decontextualizing teaching and learning from the ethnicities, cultures, experiences of students minimizes the chances that their achievement potential will ever be fully realized" (p. 24).



Therefore, since culture infuses every aspect of our lives, it goes without saying that it affects how students learn (Irvin, 2010) as well as how teachers teach (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010). With this in mind, it stands to reason that what students encounter when they walk into formal education has been influenced by someone's culture. In this case, the culture of the creators of the curriculum who often happen to belong to the dominant group in society (Boykin, 1994). Just like other social institutions, schools tend to favor the social capital (racial and cultural) of some groups than it does of others. The social capital of the dominant group in society tends to enjoy the higher status (Horvat & Pezzetti, 2019). In the United States, the social and cultural capital of the White dominant group is highly valued as demonstrated in educational practices. This results in White gaze, which in education refers to a way of evaluating students' experiences and learning using a system designed for White middle-class students (Alim & Paris, 2017) - a system that disadvantages already marginalized groups of people.

On the one hand, it is more likely for students who belong to the dominant culture to experience a continuum of their way of life at school because of familiarity with some of the concepts found in the texts used at school and some of the ways in which learning is structured and executed in the classroom (for example an emphasis on individual learning as opposed to collaborative learning). On the other hand, students of a minority culture are less likely to have the same experience if their home culture is significantly different from that of the dominant culture they have to adapt to at school. When the culture of schools and that of ethnic groups is incongruent, students' academic achievement can be impacted negatively, partly because "how some ethnically and culturally diverse individuals customarily engage in intellectual processing, self-presentation, and task performance is different from the processes used in school" (Gay,

2010, p. 18). To counter these inequities, Alim and Paris (2017) advocate for “centering the dynamic practices and selves of students and communities of color in a critical, additive, and expansive vision of schooling” (p.2) that affirms and validates their experiences.

### **Inclusive Education**

The United Nation’s Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines inclusive education as education that puts “the right to education into action by reaching out to all learners, respecting their diverse needs, abilities and characteristics and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the learning environment” (2013, p.1). Inclusive education stems from the belief that all students have a right to education (Villegas et al., 2017) and aims to rectify educational inequities that students from traditionally marginalized groups have endured over the years (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016).

Even though inclusive educational practices are not about specific groups of people but about “seeing and responding to human difference for the benefit of everyone involved” (Lawrence-Brown & Sapon-Shevin, 2014, p. 4), nevertheless, they aim to address the academic needs of traditionally marginalized populations. Individual teachers take it upon themselves to include issues of diversity in course curricula. The approach is not about assimilation of marginalized groups into the mainstream, instead, it is about accommodating differences and viewing differences as valuable thus reconstructing societal views about difference (Lawrence-Brown & Sapon-Shevin, 2014). Having inclusive classrooms does not mean that every classroom should have the same amount or type of resources and use the same approaches to learning, rather, it is about equity and providing opportunities for students to produce the same “equality of outcomes” (Souto-Manning et al., 2019, p. 64) however that may look like.

Inclusive education is a broad term within which asset-based approaches such as culturally responsive teaching strategies can thrive (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016; Villegas et al., 2017). Implementation of culturally responsive teaching, which any educator can achieve (Gay, 2010; Jett et al., 2016), is a step towards achieving inclusive education.

### **Asset-based Inclusive Instructional Approaches**

Instructional approaches that center the ethnic, cultural and linguistic aspects of students' lives acknowledge the pluralistic nature of society (Au, 2005; Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016). These approaches aim to counter deficit approaches that have historically been employed toward people of color and assert the asset nature of the cultural experiences of marginalized groups by adding their voices into the taught curriculum (Paris, 2016). One such approach is culturally relevant pedagogy which uses "cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" and thus "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.18).

Another approach is culturally responsive teaching, which is defined as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). This concept is based on the belief that when learning is "situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly" (Gay, 2002, p. 106).

An additional asset-based approach to teaching and learning is the cultural and linguistic responsive approach which Hollie (2018) defines as "the validation and affirmation of indigenous (home) culture and language for the purpose of building and bridging the students to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society" (p. 27). This is an approach that asks

educators to “jump into the pool with the learners, guide them with appropriate instruction, scaffold as necessary, and provide for independence when they are ready” (p.27). Hollie refers to this approach as VABB - “validation, affirmation, building, and bridging” (p.27). According to Hollie, through VABBing, students’ home languages and cultures are validated as valuable and necessary; those cultures and languages are affirmed through the provision of alternate academic perspectives that differ from the commonly perpetuated mainstream perspectives; the students’ cultures and languages are used as building blocks for relationship building in academic settings; and students are equipped with the tools necessary to be able to succeed both at school and in society at large.

Another approach referenced in this literature review is culturally sustaining pedagogy. According to Alim and Paris (2017), culturally sustaining pedagogy is an asset-based approach to teaching that “seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (p.1). In other words, the authors argue, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to value and appreciate every person’s way of life by disrupting the hegemonic approaches of viewing culture, language and literacy. Ladson-Billings (1994) defines cultural hegemony as “the established view of things- a commonsense view of what is and why things happen that serves the interests of those people already privileged in a society” (p. 46). Culturally sustaining pedagogy arose because the terms “relevant” and “responsive” were not adequately describing “the teaching founded upon them and, more importantly, ... they [did not] go far enough in their orientation to the languages and literacies and other cultural practices of communities marginalized by systemic inequalities” (Paris, 2012, p. 93).

We see that the above approaches share a lot in common with regard to how they view the role of culture in student learning. Gay (2010) downplays the naming distinctions and points to what all the approaches share in common. Gay insists, and I concur, that all these approaches or pedagogies have at their core the importance of incorporating the cultures and backgrounds of culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse students into classroom instruction. Gay (2010) further notes that all the pedagogies are similar in that they center the whole student and see a student's cultural heritage as an asset that can be utilized in the classroom to enhance academic achievement. Here, academic achievement means learning that leads to students' intellectual growth (their reasoning, problem-solving, and moral development skills), not merely passing standardized tests (Ladson-Billings, 2017). In this regard, culture, in its entirety, is used to bridge the gap between new knowledge and what the student already knows. Accordingly, all these educational approaches are asset pedagogies with a social justice component that calls on students to be active participants in their learning and in the society and to reject the status quo, especially if it serves to perpetuate injustices and intolerance. A difference worth noting is that culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to move the discussion beyond relevance and response to include sustenance of cultures, especially youth cultures.

The various terminologies are applied in this study as they have been used by the respective authors whose work is cited. To avoid confusion, instead of using acronyms, the complete names of the teaching and learning approaches have been used in the manner in which the authors have used them. Where a specific term has not been preferred in a cited study or where multiple terms have been used, the phrase of choice that I have applied is culturally relevant and responsive teaching.

## **The Need for Asset-based Strategies**

At the core of culturally and linguistically relevant and responsive teaching is the need to push back against the systemic nature of inequality in society that has led to academic underachievement among students of color (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Au, 2005; Gay, 2010; Paris, 2016) by centering cultural norms and practices that have otherwise been relegated to the sidelines. This approach harnesses the cultural knowledge of students and views students' culture as an asset to be utilized in the learning process (Kana 'iaupuni et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2011). Studies have shown that minority youths especially "do better at school when they feel strongly anchored in the identities of their families, communities, and peers, and when they feel supported in pursuing a strategy of selective or additive acculturation" (Gibson, 1997, p. 431). To illustrate, in a study of over 1,500 Latino K-12 students that investigated the perceived educational barriers of Latino students, the results showed overwhelmingly that Latino students did not do well in school when their white teachers labelled them with behavior or learning problems, a characterization that "may stem from a lack of understanding of Latino culture and how best to address Latino students and engage them in the learning process" (Becerra, 2012, p. 173). Other minority students, including indigenous students, have also been impacted negatively by the disparity between their home culture and the school culture.

Clearly, there is a need for culturally relevant and responsive teaching in our current education system. When schools recognize and appreciate the knowledge the students already possess, they are able to tailor instruction to connect with that knowledge. That is why, in order for school to be meaningful to students, it "must represent present life - life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground" (Dewey, 2009, p.37). In other words, Dewey is advocating for a continuum between the social

life and the academic life of the students for the learning to be meaningful and relevant to them. This is because how people learn is culturally determined, especially by the culture and socialization practices of the individual student (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Rogoff, 2003).

Culturally, linguistically, and ethnically relevant education requires teachers who are committed to centering culture in education. Such a teacher develops, over time, a socio-cultural consciousness, meaning that the teacher understands that world views, even those of the students, are influenced by lived experiences (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016; Villegas et al., 2017). It follows that with socio-cultural awareness, a teacher is not likely to impose his or her values or interpretations to try and understand students' lived experiences, especially students who have historically been marginalized. In addition, socio-culturally conscious teachers understand that they may enjoy social privileges (especially if they identify with the dominant group) that have shaped their perspectives of themselves and others (Villegas et al., 2017).

Culturally relevant and responsive teaching is meaningful when it is a catalyst for “transforming instructional practices to make the difference for improving relationships between students and educators and increasing student achievement” (Hollie, 2018, p. 21). As a strategy, it not only allows teachers to reflect upon and meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Fitchett et al., 2012), but it also enables teachers to provide opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and its relevance in their lives (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016). These teachers understand how learners construct knowledge and the role of prior knowledge, beliefs, and life experiences in understanding new concepts students encounter at school, and therefore, the teacher uses examples and analogies from student lives to introduce or clarify new concepts and thus helps students to build bridges and connections between home and school experiences (Abt-Perkins, 2011; Au, 2005; Moll et al., 1992; Villegas et al., 2017). This

happens in an environment that encourages and “integrates diverse ways of knowing and accepts different students’ perspectives” (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016) in a manner that is consistent with the students’ natural learning styles (Rychly & Graves, 2012). As a result, students are able to see the relevance and are more likely to remember the information, remain engaged and involved, and achieve the objective of the lesson as well (Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Scherff & Spector, 2011; Yamauchi et al., 2005).

According to Gay (2002) culturally responsive teachers design culturally relevant curricula, which involves analyzing the formal curricula to determine its multicultural strengths and weaknesses and working to address any gaps; analyzing the symbolic curriculum (what is usually displayed in a classroom) to include artifacts from other cultures to signify their importance; and analyzing the societal curriculum, that is, the portrayal of an ethnic group in the mass media and in popular culture and addressing misinformation and stereotypes. Culture based instruction as an approach allows students to “see their culture in the curriculum and instruction” (Milner, 2011, p. 70) because teachers include the students in the knowledge creation process. And as teachers engage in cultural responsiveness in their instructional practice, it is no longer just about teaching content, but it is also about demonstrating respect and value for other peoples’ ways of knowing and being (Toppel, 2015).

The results of culturally responsive teaching “include not only deeper learning of content, but also, an opportunity for students to learn to value their own and each other’s differing perspectives that supports the development of stronger democratic citizenship” (Fulton, 2009, p. iii). Therefore, utilizing culture as a vehicle for instruction yields benefits not just for the individual student but also for the class as a whole.



### ***Culturally Familiar Tasks***

One of the ways teachers can incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies is through the tasks they assign students. Since learners are constantly actively constructing knowledge, providing students with culturally familiar tasks helps them to bridge the gap between what they know and what they need to know (Kelley et al., 2015). Using culturally familiar tasks not only increases student motivation, confidence, and academic achievement, but it also propels the student to transfer similar learning strategies to multiple subjects following success in one subject area (Kelley et al., 2015). The tasks allow students to engage with the curriculum meaningfully and authentically (Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011).

### ***Critical Inquiry***

Another strategy that culturally relevant and responsive teachers use is critical inquiry. Critical inquiry refers to the practice of investigating a phenomenon in order to arrive at a new understanding of the said phenomenon. Critical inquiry supplements explicit instruction and is culturally responsive because it encourages students to focus their inquiry on their individual interests as they construct knowledge (Piazza et al., 2015). Critical inquiry also allows students to deepen understanding of a theme and elicit personal connections (Sharma & Christ, 2017).

Either individually or collaboratively, the teacher creates opportunities for students to engage in the inquiry process by generating questions, seeking answers to those questions, and sharing their discoveries with others (Piazza et al., 2015). Other methods include utilizing the community as a resource (Ladson-Billings, 1995) by investigating the neighborhoods through observations, exploration, questioning, documentation of any inequities that might be present and suggestion of ways in which matters can be improved (Ghiso et al., 2019), interviews with

community leaders as well as ordinary people at home or at their places of business, and photography (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016; Ghiso et al., 2019). Using students' photographs not only provides glimpses into their lives and opens doors for conversations that would otherwise not come up or be too difficult to address, but it also connects home life to school life because students are able to relate what they are learning at school with photographs that are relevant and extend their learning (Laman & Henderson, 2019). By providing students with the space to engage in critical inquiry, the teacher is more of a facilitator of knowledge, knowledge which is dynamic and has room to be challenged, critiqued, and assessed in multiple ways (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### ***Critical Literacy***

When students engage in critical literacy in the process of learning how to read and write, they gain awareness of their own experiences as "historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p.82). Students also get to compare and contrast their lived experiences with those they read about (Bishop, 2014). It encourages students to be present in their learning because it involves reading texts reflectively and critically in order to interpret, understand, and assess both positive and negative human power relations (Coffey, 2008).

Successful critical literacy requires that both the teachers and the students realize "what they bring to a text and what is hidden in the contexts of text" (Zhang, 2015, p. 1320). This can be a difficult concept for some learners to grasp, especially if they come from a culture of learning where they do not question the authority of a text (Alford, 2001).

In classroom settings, teachers who engage in critical literacy recognize that texts carry within them the motivations and perspectives of the author which are informed by the society in which the author knows - the author's world (Coffey, 2008). Here, text is defined as any

material, both written and non-written, that people use as a means of meaningful communication with others, including the execution of curriculum (Coffey, 2008; Kesler, 2011). Indeed, interaction with texts is a “social relationship that privileges and empowers some readers and marginalizes and disempowers others” (Kesler, 2011, p. 420).

Teachers who encourage their students to read, observe or listen to texts critically aim to challenge the status quo, and give voice to traditionally repressed voices, provide students with opportunities to actively construct knowledge and relate it to tangible real-life events, and create spaces for students to be teachers as they come to new understandings and share them with others (Coffey, 2008). Some of the ways that teachers engage their students in critical literacy include providing supplemental texts that offer an alternative and current points of view, exploring the same theme through the use of multiple texts and multiple perspectives from different authors, providing students with opportunities to produce counter-texts that allow them to insert their voices in the conversation, and also providing students with research opportunities where they get to deepen their learning by exploring areas of interest through self-determined topics (Coffey, 2008; Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016).

### ***Learning and Teaching Materials***

Having inclusive classrooms means being cognizant of the fact that the materials in the classroom have the potential to either include or exclude some students. This is grounded in the belief that when students “do not see themselves in their classroom and its materials, they may feel that they do not belong. Conversely, when students are overrepresented in classroom materials, they might develop an overinflated impression of who they are and of the importance of their experiences, values, beliefs, and perspectives” (Souto-Manning et al., 2019, p. 66). Texts are inherently not neutral, and that they bring with them political, social, and cultural nuances,

therefore, teachers should include critical literacy strategies in their instructional practices and also include supplemental texts that make accommodations that strengthen a curriculum, include all learners, and counter the ways in which texts may intentionally or unintentionally marginalize some students (Farinde-Wu, Glover, & Williams, 2017; Kesler, 2011)

Teachers can equip their classroom libraries with books and resources that reflect the cultural and linguistic composition of the students in the classroom (Gort, 2019). This might include adding to the classroom library books written in languages other than English to promote native language fluency and cultural competence or what Symons and Ponzio (2019) refer to as “spacious teaching”, which occurs when teachers create room for students to be “knowledge-holders and knowledge-creators” as they teach others, including the teachers, about their language and cultures (p. 23).

Students appreciate it when teachers include instructional materials that help them to connect educational concepts to their own lived experiences and “when they do not make assumptions about shared experiences among their students” (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019, p. 603). One of the ways teachers can affirm student identity is through selection of texts with story lines, illustrations, and characters that students can identify with (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018) and that are relevant to students’ home cultures (Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011) and lived experiences (Chen & Yang, 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2017). When teachers use materials and resources that reflect diverse perspectives (Villegas et al., 2017), it can increase motivation and allow students to make meaning of the texts (Sharma & Christ, 2017).

Educators use culturally authentic texts with the hope of engaging, motivating, informing, and entertaining students in order to build their literacy levels. In addition to choosing texts that students identify with culturally, teachers should engage in read-alouds because the practice is

“the cultural complement to storytelling for many students, including those in the middle and secondary grades” (Hollie, 2018, p. 149).

In many schools, computers and cell phones have become common instructional tools. Some schools have digital books and assignments that students access online using their devices. The advantages of digital instructional tools include individualized and differentiated instruction, immediate and interactive feedback, active student participation, and consistent instructional delivery, especially in classrooms where students are at different stages of language acquisition or learning in general (Musti-Rao et al., 2015).

### ***Building Relationships***

Relationship building is at the heart of culturally responsive and relevant instruction. Teachers get to know their students individually, not from a general stereotyping perspective, but from a personal perspective (Villegas et al., 2017) The teachers also share their own experiences with their students (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019) in order to foster a welcoming and comfortable learning environment. By doing this, the teacher gains insights into students as unique human beings, establishes relationships with them, and helps to make students feel seen and accepted which can lead to better attendance, participation, and motivation. Moreover, as they get to know their students, the teachers encourage them to engage in “critical examinations of their identities juxtaposed to the global society” (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017, p. 294).

When teachers get to know more about their students’ lives, families, (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018) and communities, it aids the teacher in understanding and valuing students’ experiences and knowledge bases thus affirming students’ cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identities thereby helping them develop pride in who they are (Fink, 2017; Sharma &

Christ, 2017). Teachers use this knowledge as a cultural vehicle to aid in student learning (Paris, 2016; Yuan & Jiang, 2019).

Other strategies that teachers can use to get to know their students include having them write about themselves (Bomer, 2017), engaging in informal conversations with students within and without the classroom, home visits, close observations of student behavior while at school (even when not in the classroom), using translators to speak to students in their native language when language is a barrier (Toppel, 2015), asking students to share about their culture and backgrounds during class discussions, and by “relating cultural stories, concepts, and vocabulary to students’ past or future learning experience” (Chen & Yang, 2017, p. 84). Through class discussions and collaborative learning, the teacher helps students build relationships with each other, which bolsters students’ accountability for each other’s learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rogoff, 2003). In the process, students not only learn about each other’s cultures, but they are also presented with an opportunity to learn different perspectives and utilize resources from multiple sources in their learning, irrespective of the content (Gay, 2010).

### ***Caring***

Caring is an integral part of culturally responsive teaching and usually translates into teachers having high performance expectations for their students (Gay, 2010; Villegas et al., 2017). To engage in this type of caring, Gay claims that teachers need to build a knowledge base about ethnic and cultural diversity in educational settings. Gay adds that it requires teachers to be self-aware of their own cultural biases with regard to the “expectations they hold for students from different ethnic groups; and how their beliefs and expectations are manifested in instructional behaviors” (p. 70). Self-introspection involves examining, critiquing, and reflecting upon one’s own biases toward students who belong to minority ethnic, linguistic and racial

groups, and the adoption of the stance that these students' varied languages, cultures, and ethnicities add to the beauty of diversity and are, hence, not problems that teachers should resolve so that students can be successful academically (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Yuan & Jiang, 2019).

In addition to high expectations and self-awareness and in a bid to enhance cultural sensitivity and critical consciousness, Gay (2010) asserts that caring teachers include the practice of dialoguing with others (colleagues, supervisors, students, and parents) about issues of diversity in the classroom in order to share perceptions and to correct misconceptions. They encourage the expansion of students' knowledge beyond the classroom and their individual cultures, thereby facilitating tolerance and cross-cultural competence among the students (Chen & Yang, 2017).

### ***Cultural Competence***

Ladson-Billings (2017) defines cultural competence as "the skill and facility to help students recognize and appreciate their culture of origin while also learning to develop fluency in at least one other culture ...the mainstream one, since it is typically the culture of commerce and social advancement" (p. 145). Here, the emphasis is on helping students to build their own cultural knowledge because this knowledge is viewed as an asset to aid in student academic success.

Knowledge of one's culture is critical in developing empathy and appreciation for other people and their cultures, and confidence in one's own cultural background can translate into empathy for students' cultures and backgrounds thus leading to validation and affirmation of students' cultural norms and languages (Hollie, 2018; Villegas et al., 2017). Culturally competent teachers do not require students to conform to the dominant culture, rather, they

affirm student identities and encourage them to maintain their identities and be themselves in the way they dress, speak, or interact with their peers as well as their teachers (Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, these teachers take their instructional cues from their students on important topics and, as facilitators of knowledge, they offer “space, support, and companionship for such student-initiated journeys” (Dutro et al., 2011, p. 57).

A study that investigated the experiences of Arab and Arab American youth revealed that the students who had opportunities to share about their cultural identity in school settings felt included, supported, and appreciated which led to satisfaction with their school-related experiences (Najjar et al., 2019). Avenues that create opportunities for students to practice cultural competence include sharing their own stories, reading a variety of texts written by diverse authors and discussing those texts, and using their home languages whenever opportunities arise (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019).

In addition to providing opportunities for students to share their work and personal stories with other students thereby enriching their relationships, the teacher also publishes the students’ work in the classroom thus according students a means to experience pride and worth in their work and efforts (Sharma & Christ, 2017). By encouraging students to share their stories in a safe and respectful classroom environment within the literacy curriculum, teachers give voice to students’ perspectives and communicate to them that their experiences have value (Yuan & Jiang, 2019). In such settings, language is used as a medium to both dispel cultural stereotypes and connect different cultures through sharing (Prier, 2012). In addition, when interacting with their peers, students have an opportunity to practice the new target language (Martin-Beltrán, 2017).



In a study that explored the perspectives of Arab-American, Chaldean , African American, and European American middle school students, the researchers found that rather than “teachers being fluent and competent in various cultures,” students were more interested in the promotion of cultural competence and cultural sensitivity among students and a demonstration of authentic caring by their teachers through favorable teacher attitudes and beliefs toward diverse students (Kumar et al., 2019, p. 102). Even though teachers do not need to know every aspect of a student’s culture in order to practice culturally responsive teaching, teachers should focus on “those elements of cultural socialization that most directly affect learning [and require students to] clarify their ethnic values while correcting factual errors about cultural heritages” (Gay, 2010, p. 34). This causes students to demonstrate their cultural competence, and it also empowers them to believe in their own abilities, which can translate into ownership of learning as well as academic and personal success.

### ***Classroom Expectations and Environment***

Culturally responsive teachers make their classroom expectations and the purpose of the class or course explicitly known so that students are not left to guess as to what those might be (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019). In addition, they create inclusive classroom environments that are welcoming and provide students with evidence of their perspectives through the display of their own work and other cultural referents that can add to a sense of belonging, pride, and motivation toward academic success (Chen & Yang, 2017; Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019; Fink, 2017; Gay, 2010; Hollie, 2018; Villegas et al. 2017). This classroom, co-created by both the students and the teacher, also fosters a community of learners (Prier, 2012) and encourages students to build authentic relationships with each other and with the teacher (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018). This is also a classroom environment where students have space to have

conversations, even uncomfortable conversations about race, culture and events in the media (Fink, 2017). In addition, when students dialogue and work with knowledgeable peers through collaboration, they are able to process complex ideas, reflect on their own thinking and ideas, and hear from their peers who may end up clarifying any confusing concepts or information (Gay, 2010; Piazza et al., 2015). This might call for the teacher to employ effective cross-cultural communication skills that take into account the spoken communication styles of different ethnic groups, especially in whole group and small group settings, and their written communication styles, for instance, how different groups of people organize ideas and tasks when writing (Gay, 2002).

In this environment, classroom management becomes collaborative in nature where the teacher takes the lead and the students participate in the process, the teacher knows when to “be authoritative and how to be artful” (Hollie, 2018, p. 90) as the situation dictates, and there is rapport, respect, and a relationship between the teacher and the students (Hollie, 2018).

### ***Sociopolitical Consciousness***

Asset based approaches and pedagogies have at their heart issues of racial, cultural, and social justice where students are encouraged to be change agents by challenging structural inequality and cultural hegemony, promoting equality, and engaging in critical literacy (Alim & Paris, 2017; Au, 2005; Bucholtz et al., 2017; Gay, 2010; Hollie, 2018; Kinloch, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Villegas et al., 2017).

Asset-based pedagogies call for a “critical and intentional deconstruction of the status quo” (Parsons & Wall, 2017, p. 16), meaning that students should take it upon themselves to advocate for themselves and other marginalized groups, even when such endeavors are controversial and uncomfortable (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Parsons & Wall, 2011). Academic

success should be developed concurrently with sociopolitical consciousness in such a way that students are taught not to be ashamed or apologize for who they are. In this regard, culturally responsive teaching is emancipatory because it “releases the intellect of students of color from the constraining manacles of mainstream canons of knowledge and ways of knowing” (Gay, 2010, p. 37). In an effort to effect change, teachers encourage students to participate in learning institutions with the goal of using their cultures and heritages as resources that help them to achieve institutional access and challenge structural inequality (Bucholtz et al., 2017).

### **Resistance to Asset-based Approaches**

Some educators might struggle with the implementation of culturally responsive teaching due a lack of quality resources that teachers can confidently use in the classroom, a lack of best practices that teachers can replicate in their classrooms, and a lack of “support and training that are necessary for designing instruction that is relevant to all students in their classroom” (Neri et al., 2019, p. 211). In addition, the absence of a universal definition troubles some educators. Hollie (2018) posits that this lack of a universal common understanding of culturally responsive teaching can be attributed to some factors, such as, a focus on “racial identity rather than the myriad cultural identities in our collective diversity” (p. 25), a lack of acknowledgement of the important role that home languages play in culture, and a lack of emphasis on pedagogy, which Hollie defines as the “how and why of teaching, the strategic use of methods, and the rationale behind why instructional decisions are made” (p.25). It is important to keep in mind that the face and nature of diversity varies from one classroom to another (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017), and the very nature of culturally relevant and responsive teaching approaches dictates that teachers individualize learning for each student. In addition, it is an approach that requires the teacher to practice responsiveness at the individual level, which makes attempts to generalize or design a

one-fits-all guidebook impractical (Toppel, 2015). The lack of a comprehensive guidebook to prepare teachers for cultural relevance and responsiveness can be frustrating for teachers looking for specific instructions on how to be culturally responsive. But that need not be a detractor. Toppel (2015) is of the view that teachers can incorporate culturally responsive teaching in their existing practices by using strategies such as caring for students, encouraging collaboration, and motivating participation from all students.

### **Academic Standards and Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching**

According to Dewey (1910), the purpose of education is to protect the individual from his own erroneous thoughts that are influenced by self-interest and that stem from long-held prejudices. Dewey adds that presently, “the work of teaching must not only transform natural tendencies onto trained habits of thought, but must also fortify the mind against irrational tendencies current in the social environment, and help displace erroneous habits already produced” (p.26). The assumption here is that without education, an individual will persist in performing behaviors that the dominant culture determines to be undesirable. The dominant culture determines which rules and behaviors should be adhered to for “regulating thought and action in society” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p.263).

Consequently, education becomes the vehicle through which the desired uniformity in thought and action is achieved. Tyler (1969) argues that education is a means by which basic values are transmitted from generation to generation and that education, and by extension schools, is the means by which young people are equipped to deal effectively with life’s problems. Further, Tyler (1969) asserts that educational objectives only result when “the information about the learner is compared with some desirable standards, some conception of acceptable norms, so that the difference between the present condition of the learner and the

acceptable norm can be identified” (p.6). Once the needs or gaps are identified, Tyler continues, it then becomes the purpose of education to meet the needs “so that the resulting behavior is socially acceptable” (p. 7). Hence, educational standards attempt to meet the identified gaps of a learner. Once the gaps are identified, education serves to mold the individual learner into the image the society desires him or her to have.

Popkewitz (2004) takes the discussion of standards further by reaching beyond education to include other facets of society. Consequently, standards in a society exist to govern people and “make society legible and manageable” (Popkewitz, 2004, p. 244). In addition, Popkewitz asserts, standards were invented to enable those governing to have knowledge of the previously unknown with the aim to “intervene and regulate the people of a realm” (p. 245). It seems, therefore, that standards generally exist to monitor people, including their compliance or non-compliance with the wishes of the powers that be. In the same way, the standards of teaching and learning are about producing a certain kind of person – a person that allays the fears of those in power and conforms to societal expectations. Popkewitz (2004) adds that the aim of the standards in education is to “make the children legible, easily administrable, and equal” (p. 245). Again, as in society at large, standards in schools can be regarded as a form of control, a means by which the authorities exercise power over the students.

When we talk about standards in general, we are referring to a “level of quality or excellence” (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017, p.3). According to the U.S. Department of Education, the purpose of educational standards is to provide students with a set of academic learning goals that they should achieve in a given content area. Standards differ from standardization which refers to “making things exactly the same” (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017, p. 3). Some educators confuse standards with standardization when they design curricula to fit one and all. When educators

standardize instruction, it becomes problematic because knowledge is political, and the dominant groups in society get to set the educational agenda. In a diverse country where there are multiple funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), it is important to create spaces in the curriculum where other voices can not only be heard but they can be acknowledged as well (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017).

Many public schools are required to implement the academic standards set forth by their states, therefore, it is important for teachers to become familiar with the standards for their content area so that “they can critically navigate them while also creating ways for students to bring in their own cultures to critically analyze and connect to more sanctioned forms of learning in schools” (Camangian, 2015, p. 450). Since, as some argue, standards are meant to serve as a vision, not an endorsement (Valencia & Wixson, 2013), to be suggestive, not prescriptive, then culturally responsive teachers in today’s diverse and multicultural classroom settings find creative ways to appreciate and value difference, engage in differentiated instruction, promote equity and parental involvement, and include previously excluded voices, knowledge resources, and diversity of experience leading to varied viewpoints and creative dialogue in the classroom (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017).

### **English Learners in the Classroom**

The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) defines an English learner as one who has “sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language.” Many schools in the United States are increasingly serving the English learner population as diversity continues to grow. Many minority students, including refugee newcomers, are English learners, and like other minority groups, one of the reasons they struggle in school is the disconnect between their home cultures and the school culture (Nykiel-Herbert,

2010). The struggles arise because the assessments, evaluations and the curriculum in general are biased and do not take into account their varied experiences (Lenski et al., 2006). To counter this, it is imperative for teachers to become knowledgeable about not only the cultural backgrounds of students (Allison & Rehm, 2007; Aronson and Laughter, 2016), but also their religious, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds (Hansen-Thomas & Chennapragada, 2018; Lenski et al., 2006; Johnson & Chang, 2012).

Furthermore, when teachers proactively embed their students' culture into their instructional strategies, it creates a safe and inclusive learning environment where the students can thrive academically (Au, 2005; Chen & Yang, 2017; Gay, 2010; Lee, 2010; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018; Yuan & Jiang, 2019). Such opportunities include the use of creative writing and art, which would encourage students to explore and affirm their various identities, interests, and experiences and by doing so, they “repudiate negative stereotypes and simultaneously construct identities of competence that fuel academic engagement” (Cummins et al., 2015, p. 557).

Another challenge English learners and newcomers to the United States encounter is unfamiliarity with the education system and the historical, social and cultural issues of the country (Alford, 2001). This leaves them feeling lost in the classroom, and they might not have the language skills to ask for help or clarification. To address this, teachers can offer explicit explanation of U.S. centered classroom procedures and practices that ELL students may not be familiar with (Yuan & Jiang, 2019). In addition, teachers can help students acquire situational appropriates. This is where students engage in culture switching, a practice that involves “an intentional choice to skillfully and proficiently shift from one linguistic or cultural mode into

another one without giving up, disavowing, or abandoning the home culture or language” (Hollie, 2018, p. 53).

To cope with the challenges of learning a new language, English learners engage in translanguaging. Translanguaging is an interdisciplinary strategy (Conteh, 2018) and refers to the students’ use of their native language(s) or linguistic resources to make meaning of new content (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018; Sugarman, 2018), to communicate with each other when a common language is shared, or even to communicate with the teacher who may speak the students’ native language (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018). Translanguaging is also useful for learning new vocabulary, accessing prior knowledge, building home-school connections, decoding reading assignments, and creating spaces for linguistic and cultural tolerance (Pacheco & Miller, 2016). Other uses of translanguaging include “code-switching, translating, and language brokering, or interpreting between culturally and linguistically diverse individuals” (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016, p. 654). Translanguaging demonstrates how linguistically versatile, skillful, and creative students can be, and it should be encouraged in the classroom (Gort, 2019).

However, there are teachers who generally believe that the use of the native language interferes with the learning of a second language (Mellom et al., 2018). Even when they know that it takes time for English learners’ expressive language to catch up to their receptive language, few teachers provide opportunities for English learners to use their first language skills to understand new information (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018).

Language is a part of culture and cannot be separated from students’ identity (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019), and the more teachers can learn about their students’ native language histories, their experiences with those languages, and how those languages differ or are similar to



English, the more they can support the students and leverage those languages in learning academic content (Gort, 2019). By incorporating student languages in instruction, teachers are affirming to the students that their languages and identities are valued and useful for learning (Baker, 2019; Symons and Ponzio, 2019). Teachers can accomplish this by providing students with opportunities to bridge the concepts they already know to the academic school world (Hollie, 2018). An example of bridging would be when the teacher provides the technical definition of a term a student may not be familiar with and the student in turn makes a personal connection through art, pictures or illustrations (Hollie, 2018; Piazza et al., 2015), or translation of the definition from the target language to the home language or slang. Allowing students to use their native languages in the classroom for learning and communication (Fink, 2017) can increase their language confidence, and teachers can leverage these languages during instruction (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016).

Other ways to integrate student knowledge and languages in their learning is through the use of online tools such as Google Translate (Symons and Ponzio, 2019), which assist students with reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Translating from the native language to English helps English learners to have better reading comprehension and to develop metalinguistic awareness because students are able to see how the linguistic structures of their native languages compare to those of the target language, in this case, English.

## **Synthesizing Approaches to Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching**

### ***Culturally Relevant Education***

Aronson and Laughter (2016) adopted the term culturally relevant education (CRE) to refer to the synthesis of Ladson-Billing's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy and Gay's (2002) culturally responsive teaching. Dover (2013) asserts that the CRE approach "integrates critical

pedagogy’s emphasis on sociopolitical consciousness with multicultural education’s commitment to culturally diverse content” (p. 5). While CRE aims to connect students' lives to their learning in order to empower them, it also endeavors to fight oppression so that all people can have a chance to access societal resources and opportunities (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). According to Aronson and Laughter (2016), culturally relevant educators have four markers that correspond to the main features of both culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching. The following table shows how the markers are distributed:

**Table 1**

*Synthesizing the works of Gay and Ladson-Billings*

<b>Culturally responsive teaching</b>	<b>Culturally relevant pedagogy</b>	<b>Culturally relevant education</b>
-Social and academic empowerment -Multidimensionality	Academic achievement	Academic skills and concepts
Cultural validation	Cultural competence	Critical reflection
Social, emotional, and political comprehensiveness		Cultural competence
School and societal transformation	Sociopolitical consciousness	Critique of discourses of power
Emancipation or liberation from oppressive educational practices and ideologies		

These four markers are further explained below:

- a) Academic skills and concepts: Culturally relevant educators are inclusive and use their students’ cultural knowledge to help them to connect to academic knowledge.

- b) Critical reflection: Culturally relevant educators provide students with opportunities for critical reflection on their own lives and societies. In addition, the curriculum makes room for analysis and study of all cultures represented in the classroom.
- c) Cultural competence: Culturally relevant teachers provide students with opportunities to not only learn more about their own cultures and those of their classmates, but the students are also encouraged to take pride in their cultural heritage and that of others.
- d) Critique of discourses of power: Culturally relevant educators are not content with the status quo and seek to effect social change within and without the classroom.

### **The Role of Teacher Agency in Culturally Relevant Education**

Teacher beliefs about their craft and profession influence how they interact with students, the expectations they have for themselves and the students, their actions toward students and their peers, and the effect they have on student learning and behavior (Horvat & Pezzetti, 2019; Mellom et al., 2018). Similarly, teachers' values influence how they deliver instruction. Even when delivering a common standards-based curriculum, teachers can choose to consider the linguistic, cultural and ethnic compositions of the students in their classrooms in order to make the instruction relevant to the students in a manner that resonates with them. As such, teacher agency is more about what teachers do and how they do it rather than what they possess (in terms of knowledge and expertise). Specifically, agency is “a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves” (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). This means that what constitute agency is not merely who or what an individual is, rather, it is the actions the individual engages in because of who he or she is. These actions are characterized by “particular configurations of routine, purpose and judgement” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). Simply put, when teachers take initiative and effect

change on their own for the betterment of their students, it is the very definition of teacher agency (Pantic & Carr, 2017).

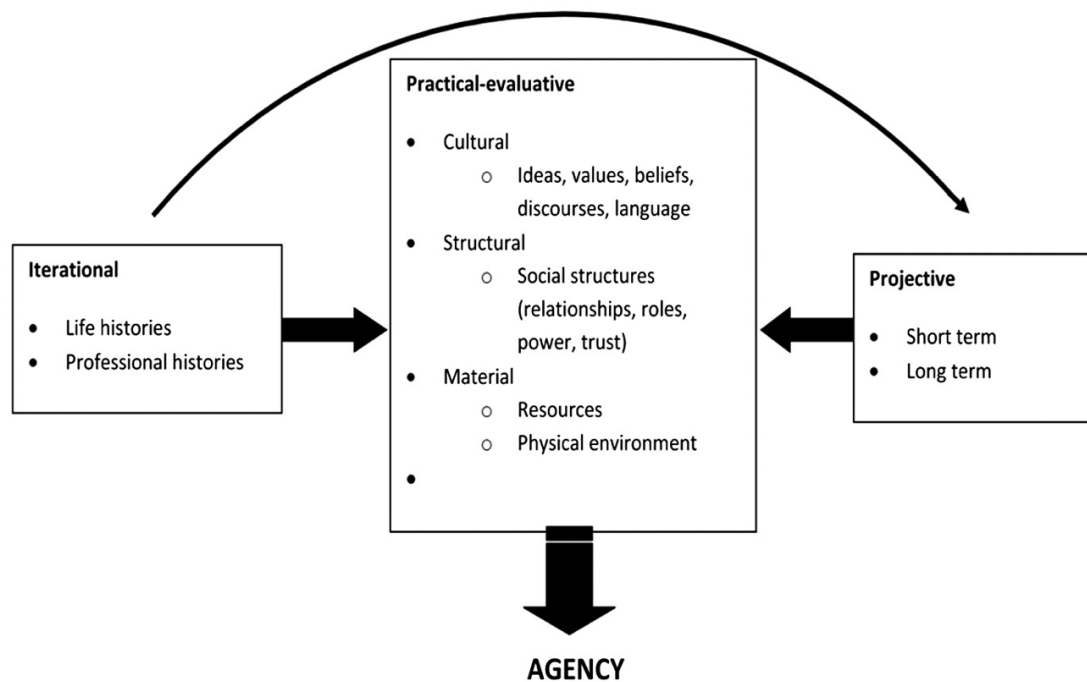
From a socio-cultural perspective, an individual's agency is determined by the social norms within which the actions occur (Ostorga, 2018). Having agency enables individuals "to make free or independent choices, to engage in autonomous actions, and to exercise judgment in the interests of others and oneself" (Campbell, 2012, p. 183). Ostorga (2018) further argues that the decisions individuals make are "both enabled and constrained by who they are and their situation at the time of choice" (p. xv). In addition, the individual's decision making and the execution of those decisions is made possible by the environment or context in which the agent or individual is operating (Priestley et al., 2012). In school settings, the teacher is the agent and the school district is the social structure within which the teacher functions (Ostorga, 2018). From a sociological perspective, teacher agency within school systems can be defined as "a teacher's capacity to make professional choices based on the knowledge and expertise of ways to produce learning and development in students" (Ostorga, 2018, p. xv). As much as teacher agency greatly depends on a teacher's personal qualities (Biesta et al., 2015), teacher agency is only impactful when a teacher believes in what he or she is doing and its usefulness in impacting student learning. When teachers exercise agency in their instructional practices, they do so within the parameters of accountability to the state, (Campbell, 2012), the school district and the individual school.

Teacher agency can be understood spatially and temporally, meaning that it is not achieved in isolation but rather, it includes "insights into the past experiences and the projective aspirations and views of agents, as well as the possibilities of the present" (Priestley et al., 2012,

p. 197-198). Biesta et al., (2015) illustrate this concept through the model for understanding the achievement of agency as shown below:

**Figure 1**

*A Model for Understanding the Achievement of Agency.*



This model demonstrates that the achievement of agency is dependent on three different factors, namely, iterational factors which refer to life histories or biographies and one's professional experiences. The second factor is projective in that it is concerned with future perspectives and aspirations - both short-term and long-term goals. Both the past and the future interact to influence the third aspect of the model, namely, the present or the practical-evaluative. The present is influenced by cultural, structural and material resources. And it is in the present that the teacher exercises agency through actions within a given context or environment.

This study, therefore, will examine the role of teacher agency in the execution of culturally relevant education in the classroom. These two conceptual frameworks will guide the research design including the research questions, data collection, and data analysis.

### **Summary**

In a constantly changing and diverse education system, new and reimagined ways of learning are called for from all stakeholders. The schools' role should be to support students in "nurturing their capacities in making meaning of themselves and the world" (Yuan & Jiang, 2019, p. 153). To this end, schools should consider hiring teachers from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds to reflect the changing demographics of our schools (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). As for teachers, addressing issues of diversity should not be approached as something extra they have to do. Instead, they should make it part of their everyday practice, not an after-thought only to be attempted when time permits (Neri et al., 2019). Florian (2017) observes that ignoring difference assumes that all learners are the same and that traditional differentiation of learning strategies for some learners can unintentionally lead to an exclusion of other students. Instead, it should be an imperative of practice for the teacher to extend to all students what the majority in the classroom are learning, and by doing this, teachers will be approaching difference as "an ordinary aspect of human development" (Florian, 2017, p.11).

In a classroom where culturally relevant and responsive instruction is implemented, the results are that "students' voices emerge and knowledge and meaning are constructed from the students' perspectives" (Irvin, 2010, p. 60) because students' backgrounds are utilized as resources to teach and learn (Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014).

The results of asset-based approaches include increased student learning and fewer behavioral issues, which can translate into better self-esteem for the student (Irvin, 2010). In addition, students get to engage in topics that are interesting and relevant to them, which can lead to not only the students learning from the teachers, but the teachers learning from the students as well (Lin & Bates, 2014).

Continuous critical self-reflection of culturally responsive teaching and learning practices will ensure that teachers' beliefs regarding the value of cultural diversity is maintained (Civitillo et al., 2019), and teachers' commitment to supporting marginalized groups is upheld (Bonner et al., 2018).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodology for the research study. This qualitative case study examined the practices of English language arts teachers serving English learners in a diverse urban high school. The study specifically investigated the culturally and linguistically relevant and responsive teaching strategies the teachers implemented in the classroom. This chapter includes a discussion of the nature of the study, namely, case study methodology, researcher positionality, the research context, data collection, and data analysis.

#### **Research Questions**

This case study sought answers the following questions:

1. What is the teachers' understanding of culturally relevant education?
2. How do the teachers incorporate culturally relevant education in standards-based instructional practices in their classrooms?
3. What motivates teachers to engage in culturally relevant education?

#### **Nature of the Study**

This is a qualitative study, meaning that it is focused on studying people's experiences, their understanding of those experiences, the meanings they attach to those experiences, and how they make sense of the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research embodies the following features: a researcher investigates phenomena in order to understand it from a participant's perspective, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, the research is carried out using an inductive process because "the researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 17), and the research is richly descriptive.



## Rationale for Case Study Method

There are different definitions of case study depending on whether one views it as a method or as a unit of study. As a unit of analysis, case study investigates a bounded case or a determination of what exactly is to be studied, and as a methodology, case study is used as a “strategy of inquiry” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). This study is both a unit of analysis and a methodology.

Creswell (2013) offers a very comprehensive definition of case study that reads as follows:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a *case description* and *case themes*. The unit of analysis in the case study might be multiple cases (a *multisite* study) or a single case (a *within-site* study).” (p. 97; emphasis in original)

Whereas Yin (2017) views case study as an investigation of a real-life phenomenon, Merriam & Tisdell (2016) define case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37), meaning that this type of study has boundaries that are akin to a fence that hems it in. Such boundaries can be determined by time, place, focus, size, purpose, or even interest (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further argue that the unit of analysis, not the topic under investigation, limits a case study and that the case can consist of any number of subjects, so long as the boundaries have been

established. To determine if a case is intrinsically bonded, and therefore, fit to be studied using the case study method, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that the researcher ask the following:

How finite the data collection would be; that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations. If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case.” (p. 39)

Since the intent of this research study is not only to understand a single case but to also replicate the study across multiple bounded cases with the intention of comparing the results among them (Creswell, 2013), it can be classified as a descriptive multi-case or collective case study. This particular case study is bounded by location, population, length of time undertaken to conduct the study, the number of cases chosen, the course taught, and the teaching practices of the teacher participating in the study. The chosen location research study is an urban high school serving a diverse population of English learners. The length of the study spans a semester because the school utilizes the semester system whereby teachers only work with most students for four months before the students proceed to another class with another teacher. The number of cases is limited to three English language arts teachers who mainly teach English learners. These cases were purposefully selected in order to discover any commonalities or differences that might exist among them with the intention of gaining a deeper understanding of teacher culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices by utilizing the “logic of replication” (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). The same concepts were investigated in each of the cases in order to represent different perspectives of the same issue (Jacob & Fergusson, 2012).

One of the factors to consider when determining whether a study is suitable for case study research is the type of questions a researcher wants to investigate (Yin, 2017). These are how and why questions aimed at eliciting the most descriptive, in-depth information. Another factor to consider is whether the social phenomenon under investigation is ongoing and whether it is contemporary or current. For this study, an in-depth understanding of teacher practices was determined to be crucial, hence the suitability of the case study approach. Additionally, when answered, the why and how questions that comprised the interview questions (see appendix A) provided detailed descriptions that contributed to a deeper understanding of teacher culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices. Lastly, the teachers' practices are current and ongoing, and therefore, they are conducive for observation and ensuing discussions.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In research, it is important to explain researcher positionality so as to clarify “the relationship between the researcher and his or her participants and the researcher and his or her topic” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 26). A researcher's position can be influenced by the relationships the researcher has with participants, how much access the researcher has to resources in the field, and the researcher's worldview or background because it informs how the researcher understands and interprets information (Berger, 2015).

I am positioned as a teacher in the school where this study took place. I have worked at the school for almost six years. Over the years, I have had opportunities to co-teach and collaborate with the teachers who participated in this study. In addition to teaching, since I speak another language in addition to English, I have, from time to time, translated for both students and their teachers in the classroom. This has enhanced my interactions with both the teachers and students, and it has also familiarized me with their classroom practices. Therefore, even before

this study, I had already established relationships with the participants. Because I had previously taught some of the students in the classrooms I observed, I had rapport with them. Rapport with both the students and the teachers facilitated easier access to research data. This also meant that I had to assume the role of participant observer in the classrooms I observed because the students knew me to be a teacher and expected my help with their classwork.

My status as an immigrant, who was socialized in a linguistically and culturally different manner than that of the native U.S. majority culture in which I live, situates me as an insider who can be empathetic to the plight of migrants, refugees or immigrants who have to learn a new way of being in order to successfully navigate the education system in the host country. It is this inherent insider position that sparked and sustained my interest in this topic.

As much as I enjoyed familiarity and shared experiences with the teachers and some of the students, it is also possible that such familiarity could have resulted in participants not being forthcoming with information they assumed I should already know (Berger, 2015). Also, shared experiences and familiarity poses a danger of the researcher projecting his or her own experiences onto the participants (Berger, 2015) Therefore, I had to be cognizant of these possibilities, and to counter them, I conducted multiple interviews with each participant and engaged in memo writing and self-reflection in order to analyze my stance and attitudes toward the research study and the participants.

### **Research Context**

In a case study, the researcher describes the setting where the study occurred as well as the context of the study so that people can understand the parameters of the bonded system (Jones et al., 2014). This study was conducted at an urban high school in the Midwest in the United States. The school is situated in a school district whose population hovers above 22,000

students. As reported on the school district website, the student population is linguistically and culturally diverse, boasting a demographic breakdown of 50% Hispanic, 29% African-American, 11% White, and 7% Asian.

The urban high school that is the focus of this study has a student population of over 1,500 students. The student body composition estimates are as follows: 64.4% Hispanic, 24.7% Black and African American, 5.9% Asian, 3.4% White, 0.2% Native American, and 1.1% people of more than one race. Students hail from countries such as Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, Honduras, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, Ukraine and others. Some of these students are either refugees, immigrants or children of immigrants. Moreover, except for those born in the United States and belong to historically marginalized groups, very few of the students belong to the White dominant culture.

In spite of these realities, the school uses a curriculum that is heavily influenced by the United States' dominant White culture. For example, many English language arts textbooks dedicate a lot of space to texts written from Eurocentric perspectives, which means that European cultural ideas and concepts are given prominence. Furthermore, most of the teachers in the district, including the ones at the site of the study, are White middle class, which means that the students and the teachers have differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This disparity mirrors the national trend showcased by the United States Department of Education (2016) which estimates that the teaching workforce in K-12 schools has remained predominantly White with the current numbers of White teachers resting at 82 percent.

### **Sampling**

A qualitative case study method calls for purposeful sampling because of its focus on a selected single case or multiple cases. A case is identified and chosen if it meets the researcher's

criteria, which is informed by the theoretical framework, and if it has the potential to provide rich data (Jones et al., 2014). Consequently, the researcher chooses the cases that can provide the most information needed. Purposeful sampling was used in this study because it allowed me to select “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that for purposeful sampling to be effective, the researcher should “seek out groups, settings, and individuals where (and for whom) the process being studied is most likely to occur” (p. 245). Bearing this in mind, the three participants in this study were selected because they have experience teaching English language arts to linguistically and culturally diverse English learners. They have worked at the research site for about three years each.

The sampling was also guided by whether the teacher had undergone a district training on culturally relevant and responsive teaching, whether the teacher taught English language arts, and whether the teacher served non-native speakers of English. Further, the participants’ availability and the type of professional relationship I enjoy with them also played a role in the sampling process. A mutually respectful professional relationship between the research participants and I was necessary to ensure that they could share about their practices candidly without fear of intended or unintended consequences.

### **Study Participants**

Three people participated in this multi-case study. To protect the identity of the participants, I have used pseudonyms in lieu of their names. The first participant, Andrew, is a thirty-year-old White man who has been working at the school for three years. Prior to joining the school, Andrew had taught English elsewhere for seven years. His students at the current school are mostly immigrants from Uganda, Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo,

Guatemala, Uganda, El Salvador, Mexico, Burma, and Eritrea. The students were mostly intermediate English learners taking standards-based sheltered English for high school seniors. The academic standards followed at the school are those determined by the State for specific grade levels. Typically, sheltered English classes at this school typically service English learners who need a lot of support in learning English, therefore, teachers tend to blend content instruction with explicit language instruction (Sugarman, 2018).

Lucy, the second participant, is a thirty-two-year-old woman of Asian origin. She has also been teaching at the school for almost three years. She teaches standards-based English language beginner classes to immigrant students. These students come from Mexico, Uganda, Rwanda, Honduras, and Guatemala. Prior to joining the school, she had taught English to both native and non-native English speakers for over ten years.

Mary, the third participant, is a twenty-eight-year-old White woman who has been teaching English at the school for the last seven years. She is a standards-based sheltered English teacher for tenth grade intermediate English learners. She has only taught at this school and therefore has no prior teaching experience at another setting. Her students come from countries such as Argentina, Mexico, Honduras, Uganda, and Rwanda.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Interviews**

In qualitative research, data can include anything that a researcher deems necessary for understanding the topic being investigated and should not be taken at face value, but instead, it should be examined critically to evaluate its usefulness (Maxwell, 2013). For this study, data was collected from interviews, classroom observations, classroom artifacts, and field notes over the course of one fall semester (16 weeks long). Before engaging in interviews with the participants,

I was keenly aware that interviewing would not just be about asking questions, but it would involve listening for emotion behind the answers, seeking clarification or elaboration of previously discussed topics, analyzing the non-verbal cues and body language exhibited by the interviewee, being an active listener during conversations (Jones et al., 2014), and understanding that any bit of action or information can provide context to the data being collected (Maxwell, 2013).

Two interviewing approaches were utilized to collect data. The first was the semi-structured interview, which allows for flexibility in the order of questioning as well as the manner of questioning, uses broad open-ended questions, and takes advantage of opportunities for probing and follow-up questions that seek clarity (Jones et al., 2014). This interviewing method offers a level of structure that ensured that I covered all the necessary topics that needed to be investigated and at the same time provided me with room for flexibility and probing. This method afforded the flexibility needed for participants to discuss the topic organically. I scheduled time to have one-on-one in-depth interviews with the participants in their classrooms at their convenience.

The second type of interviewing method I used was the conversational interview, which is characterized by flexibility in the order and the manner in which the interview is conducted, usually involves a predetermined topic, both the participant and the researcher determine the direction of the interview, and the purpose is to gain a deep understanding of an issue (Jones et al., 2014). Because the participants are fellow colleagues who I interacted with both in informal settings and in their classrooms, whenever appropriate, I engaged them in conversations about the study as a way to seek elaboration or clarification about an issue.



I conducted at least four interviews with each of the participants. The first interview occurred after they signed the consent forms and before any observation of their classrooms had taken place. Prior to the interview, the participants were provided with the questions a few days earlier to allow them time to formulate their responses before the interview meeting. Two of the other interviews were conducted following formal observations and the last interview was conducted at the end of the data collection exercise to formally close the data collection process and to thank the participants for their cooperation and patience during the entire process.

The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

### **Observations**

Creswell (2013) defines observation as the “act of noting a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer, often with an instrument, and recording it” (p. 166). Marshall and Rossman (2016) expand the definition to include “the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, interactions, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting” (p. 143). In order to have a “firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 137), I engaged in classroom observations of the participants’ culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices. I conducted two formal classroom observations for each of the participants.

During the observations, I was a participant observer because I performed the dual roles (to varying degrees) of researching and participating in the day-to-day activities at the site (Creswell, 2013). I recorded the observations in writing and on audio. I chose audio taping instead of videotaping to avoid causing any discomfort for students who would have been made nervous by video recording. The nervousness could have arisen from sensitivity about the students’ immigration status or that of their parents. Therefore, in order to maintain a normal

classroom environment and level of engagement among the students, I elected to audio-record and take extensive field notes. The field notes were typed up and were complete with reflections in the margins. The reflections documented “the process, reflections on activities, and summary conclusions about activities for later theme development” (Creswell, 2013, p. 169).

I observed each of the teachers twice in their classrooms. As I observed them, I noted culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices the teacher may or may not have mentioned during an interview. Sometimes, some behaviors can become so commonplace that the person engaging in them takes them for granted and does not mention them during an interview. Observing the teachers in action provided me with an opportunity to witness such behavior where it existed. This enriched my understanding of the topic, and it facilitated the verification of data gathered through the interviews.

### **Field Notes**

As noted above, in addition to observations and interviews, I took field notes and used them as sources of data. Field notes are “detailed, non-judgmental (as much as possible), concrete descriptions of what has been observed” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 143). Just like Marshall & Rossman (2016) state, when I was handwriting the notes at the site, sometimes the notes resembled scribbles, but when I later typed and refined and elaborated on them to include my comments as well as the actual events at the site, they became fully-fledged field notes that I used at the data analysis stage. The fully detailed field notes allow the reader to see clearly what I, the observer, saw, anticipate any questions the reader may have, and provide the answers in advance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition to the detailed descriptions, the field notes were reflective, meaning that the notes included, in brackets or on the margins, my “feelings,

reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, [and] speculations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 151) where applicable.

### **Data Analysis**

After collecting the data, the first step I undertook to analyze that data was to transcribe all the interviews and type up all the field notes from the observations.

Next, I read through the transcripts and notes to get a sense of what was going on - what Gilligan et al. (2006) refer to as listening to the plots of the narratives. As I read through each set of data multiple times, I engaged in line by line within-case analysis (Jones et al., 2014). I wrote descriptive notes on the margins using words that the participants had used, which is commonly referred to as open coding (Gibbs, 2007; Maxwell, 2013).

Thereafter, I compared and contrasted the individual cases against each other for an across-cases analysis (Jones et al., 2014) in order to capture the overall picture of the phenomenon under study. According to Maxwell (2013), identifying similarities and differences is a form of coding and serves to “define categories and to group and compare data by category” (p. 106). During coding, I broke down the data into broad categories within which I placed the emerging themes. The categories were based on answers to the guiding research questions as well as recurring topics and themes in the data. Maxwell (2013) refers to this type of categorizing as creating organizational categories - categories that are based on broad topics established even before the data collection began. In this study, the organizational categories were derived from the research questions which were in turn influenced by theoretical categories derived from Aronson and Laughter’s (2016) culturally relevant education framework and the model of teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2015). These theoretical frameworks were definitely

established before data was collected. As I read and analyzed the data, I wrote notes, which I later used to analyze the findings and situate them in previous studies.

### **Validity and Trustworthiness**

Magolda and Weems (2002) argue that researchers always need to be aware of how their actions might affect those involved in the study. To establish trustworthiness and address any ethical concerns when recruiting participants for the study, I briefly explained to them the purpose for the study and why their knowledge and expertise would be useful. I made it clear that participation was purely voluntary and that I had in place the necessary permissions to conduct the study from the school district, the research site as well as the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I addressed the questions they had and secured a verbal consent from them. I followed up the verbal consent by presenting the participants with a formal written consent form (see appendix B) that outlined the topic and purpose of the study, the supervising professor and institution, the anticipated risks and benefits for the participant, and participant anonymity and protections.

To ensure trustworthiness during data collection and analysis, I kept detailed notes and recorded the interviews and observations. In addition, the procedures and methods employed during this study have been clearly stated (Stake, 2005) further establishing the credibility of the study.

Triangulating the data through the use of multiple cases to study the same phenomenon enhances the validity of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2005). Not only did I endeavor to observe the same phenomenon in three different cases, but I also included multiple interviews and took extensive notes. This enabled me to “cross check the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means” (Patton, 2015, p. 662). One of the

means involved analyzing how the results of this study compared with similar studies (Merriam, 2009) in the discussion section.

Creswell (2013) suggests that one of the ways to establish validity in qualitative research is to clarify researcher positions and bias. This has been achieved in this study through the details provided in the researcher positionality portion of this chapter.

The following chapter details the findings of the study. The findings, which reflect the views and practices of all the participants, are organized by research questions and the themes that arose in the course of data collection.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative case study research was to examine the culturally and linguistically relevant and responsive classroom practices of English language arts teachers serving non-native speakers of English in a diverse urban high school. The study was guided by Aronson and Laughter's (2016) culturally relevant education framework and the model of teacher agency as explained by Biesta et al., (2015). These frameworks influenced the development of the following research questions:

1. What is the teachers' understanding of culturally relevant education?
2. How do the teachers incorporate culturally relevant education in standards-based instructional practices in their classrooms?
3. What motivates teachers to engage in culturally relevant education?

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research setting, the participants, findings by research question and themes, and a summary of the findings.

### **Research Setting**

The study took place in an urban high school with a diverse population of students. The school, which is located in the Midwest, has a population of over 1500 students. The student body composition estimates are as follows: 64.4% Hispanic, 24.7% Black and African American, 5.9% Asian, 3.4% White, 0.2% Native American, 1.1% people of more than one race. The majority of the school follows the block semester system where the students have four months to complete a course.

In order to improve students' learning experiences, the school participated in a district led professional development training aimed at equipping teachers with culturally relevant and responsive teaching strategies. The rationale behind the training was to situate the role culture,

student backgrounds, and healthy and meaningful student-teacher relationships play in enhancing student academic experiences. The professional development consisted of three two-hour long training sessions spread throughout the 2017-2018 school year. The teachers involved in this study participated in the professional development. Even though all the teachers in the school district were expected to take part in the training, implementation of the concepts learned at the training was neither monitored nor formally evaluated in the classrooms. This study examined how some of the teachers who participated in the professional development voluntarily implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms.

### **Results by Research Questions**

The results for this study are organized by research questions. Data from the interviews, observations and field notes were used to analyze each individual case to identify themes. Thereafter, themes between the cases were compared and contrasted to establish relationships.

#### **Research Question 1**

The first question I asked sought to determine the teacher's understanding of culturally responsive and relevant education. To address this question, I focused on the training the school district had offered to the teachers and teachers' additional efforts to form an understanding of the concept of cultural relevance and responsiveness in the classroom. Results from the study indicate that even though the participants considered the training to have been ineffective and could not recall much of it, nevertheless, they voluntarily took initiative to educate themselves in order to develop an understanding of culturally relevant education.

#### ***Perspectives on District Professional Training***

Since all the participants had taken part in the school district's professional development training on culturally relevant and responsive training two years prior to this study, I started by

asking them how that training had informed their understanding of culturally relevant and responsive instructional strategies. **Lucy** did not remember much of the content from the district professional development training. In fact, all that **Lucy** remembered about it was that she was present and that it happened a while back by stating, “Wasn’t it a long time ago? I think it was two or three years ago, and it happened like three times. I think I was here, but our district is very diverse.”

The two participants who remembered content from the training observed that it was not very effective for different reasons. Whereas Andrew felt that it was not comprehensive enough and did not adequately address issues of diversity unique to the school district, Mary on the other hand felt that the district should have been more singular in its focus.

**Andrew** expressed his views as follows:

I think the focus of the district wasn't as much for the international students as it was for the African American students. It seemed to be more centered on them to apply what they go through. But the materials we learned from didn't really seem to cover as much as I could just learn by knowing my kids.

To recall what the training was about, Mary had to refer back to the notes she took during the training prior to our interview. In fact, she brought the notebook with her to the interview and thumbed through it as she talked to me. **Mary** stated:

It felt like we talked a lot about our district goals and I know effective relationships was one of them, and that is what these trainings talked about. But I don't feel like we ever truly went in depth looking into what culturally responsive teaching is or looks like or how to do it. The other thing I feel made it not effective is that ...it seems to always be spread out amongst all these other goals and not something that is separated, as a separate



other thing. Because we did this like once a month or once a quarter. Even if they had done something super memorable, it would have gotten lost in the shuffle because we have all these other things we are asked to focus on and I feel like it was kinda tossed in. So, I don't think it helped me understand how to be a culturally responsive teacher.

### ***Forming an Understanding***

Once the participants had established that they did not gain much from the professional development the district had offered, I proceeded to ask them how they each had developed an understanding of culturally relevant and responsive teaching. Responses from the teachers revealed that the teachers took initiative and used different methods to educate themselves about how to use culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices in their diverse classrooms. These initiatives include extensive research, experience garnered from years of working with students from various cultures, cultural-awareness, attention to detail, an appreciation of the equality of all cultures, professional training from experts, joining online ed communities, and collaboration with colleagues.

Andrew felt that he needed to conduct research in order to understand his students' cultures and backgrounds and to be better equipped to help the students academically at school.

**Andrew** further elaborates:

I try to do research on cultures and countries that I didn't really know about before. We had a huge influx of students from Burma ... and what I try to do is watch a documentary on it, like the country. Well, a lot of the tasks that I assign relate back to their cultures and their background and their previous knowledge. So, I felt unprepared when I was giving them those tasks and I really didn't have an idea or a prediction of where they were gonna go. But after I prepared more, I could give them some advice or help them better.

Lucy draws on her teaching experiences, cultural-awareness and an equity-based view of culture. **Lucy** describes it as follows:

I am aware that my students are from different cultural backgrounds. I try to convince myself not to assume anything when I see my students because, you know, I may see an Asian student, for example, when I see an Asian student, I cannot assume that this kid must speak Chinese. This kid probably is from somewhere else. Probably not from China. So, there are so many things, small details I need to pay attention to. Don't assume that any culture is better than the other. All cultures are equal. Another thing is, when you are teaching, be aware that you are not presenting your knowledge to just one predictable environment, your audience, I mean. Because your audience all have different backgrounds which means that you will have to develop different ways to suit their needs.

In addition to drawing on her daily classroom experiences, Mary has gone to the extent of seeking professional training and resources from experts in the field, and collaborating with peers both online and in the school building. **Mary** offers the following description:

I teach in a classroom that has students from all over the world. Most of my students have lived in the United States for an average of one to three years. So, I have a lot of different languages [represented] in the classroom as well as cultures, so it has been something that stares in my face every time I come into the classroom. So, most of my learning about how to be a better culturally responsive teacher and linguistically responsive teacher has been outside of school. The fellowship [Hollyhock Fellowship Program for high school teachers that is offered by Stanford University] I went to, I was able to receive some training from Dr. Sharroky Hollie. Most of my understanding about culturally and

linguistically responsive learning came from that foundation. It was something we brought back together versus by myself. So, I have people that we can practice with and hold each other accountable and continue the learning. And is probably where my foundation with it came. And also, through the NEA [National Education Association] and they have online Ed communities and I actually just found one last week where they have an online support group where they put a lot of research about strategies and voices together, so it is something I am interested in looking at.

The participants' responses demonstrate that teachers do not always have to rely on employer provided training in order to equip themselves and gain knowledge about the skills and competences they need. Instead, to achieve their objective, teachers can result to whatever resources within their means they have access to.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked the teachers how they incorporate culturally relevant education in standards-based instructional practices in their classrooms. In answer to this question, the following major themes emerged:

- During instruction, teachers should utilize students' cultural backgrounds and assign culturally familiar tasks
- The use of native languages in the classroom is beneficial, especially for students at the beginning stages of target language development.
- Universal themes that students can relate and connect to through their own cultural lenses are critical in guiding the selection of texts.
- Critical literacy is an integral part of culturally relevant education, and teachers should encourage student to critically engage with texts.

- Critical inquiry incorporates student choice and provides opportunities for students to draw on their repertoire of knowledge and resources.
- When teachers build strong and caring relationships with their students, they are more likely to affirm and validate students' experiences, advocate for them, and empathize with them.
- Teachers should provide opportunities for students to build upon their knowledge of their cultures and share the same with peers and others who may be interested.
- Teachers should implement equitable classroom management strategies and create an environment where students feel safe to be their true selves.
- Even in settings where standards-based teaching and learning is implemented, it is still possible to incorporate culturally relevant education.
- Among English learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, building in-school community connections and learning how to engage with and function in the wider community is very important.
- Among diverse English learners, sociopolitical consciousness can mean being change agents at school and at home through learning English, volunteering, and providing translation and interpreting services.

### ***Use of Cultural Background and Culturally Familiar Tasks***

Teachers discussed how they enhance their students' reading experience by using students' cultural backgrounds to activate prior knowledge, introduce new content, predict events in a story, relate their experiences, and establish connections with their own lives.

**Mary** stated that “one of the easiest ways in an English language arts class to use cultural knowledge in order to connect to new academic concepts is being able to make personal connections to the things that are read.”

**Andrew** concurred with Mary when he talked about his experience and went further to explain how predictions and connections are made using culture:

I do talk about culture a lot when I introduce the unit. Before we even read, I begin to ask social moral questions about choices that people make or possible themes that will be relevant in the story. For example, in my English 3 class, we are reading a story called “The Mirror” and in the story, when she looks in the mirror she starts to look younger and younger. Before we read the story, we talked about, like, in movies, in advertisements in your culture, is the idea of beauty really important? So, they would give me testimonies from what they remember, what they don’t remember. There is even a question like: Is there a celebrity that you wished that you looked like? And of course, with my group of students coming from all countries they have celebrities that I don’t know about, and maybe for fun we will look some up and we make some jokes about them and stuff.

**Lucy** also uses the same reading strategies with her students to predict events and evaluate outcomes in a story:

For example, when we are reading *Gaby: A girl in Pieces* [by Isabel Quintero] ..when we read the first piece, when this girl gets pregnant and then I asked them: Is this expected, is this allowed in your culture? By doing that, I also have them predict the future content. So okay, do you have any particulars from Hispanic culture? How do you think the parents of the girl will take the situation? Also, there is another boy in the story who revealed to his friend that he is gay. And I also asked them: Do you think the boy’s

parents will accept him? Whether they will accept him or whether they will give him a hard time? And how will his friends accept this? So, definitely, by using different cultural backgrounds, I can help them predict the content of the story. That is a good prediction practice for them.

In addition, assigning students culturally familiar tasks increases their engagement, allows them to draw from their experiences, and helps them tell their own stories. In the process, students' cultures are affirmed and they enjoy a sense of pride. Teachers participating in this study engage their students in such tasks. For example, **Lucy** has her students design posters that adorn her classroom. **Lucy** describes the task as follows:

The poster. Making infographics. *All About Me Project*. That is a culturally equal project. Because no matter what culture you are from, you can all do this, and you can share with other people the perspectives that you have for your culture, for your family, for whatever.

**Mary** also assigns culturally familiar tasks to her students. Using these tasks, she engages her students in writing, collaborative learning, and cultural affirmation:

My English 1's focus is place, identity, and community. Our focus the whole year is around those three things. We actually start off with the *Power of Place* unit where students choose a place that is important to them and their life - A physical place or an emotional place - if they want to go abstract they can. And then they will do some writing around how that place has impacted them and their identity...Some write about a bedroom, some write about [their city], some write about high school, some write about, like their favorite place with a person, so they choose that person to write about. It is kind

of open but they explore those ideas of identity, community, and place all throughout the unit.

**Andrew** also acknowledged the importance of culturally familiar tasks for high school students. He stated that such tasks allow students to take pride in their culture and affirms their cultural identity. **Andrew** argued:

A lot of students are facing an identity issue in high school, and so when I get a chance to point out positive aspects of their culture that I find interesting, then it kinda brings them back and lets them remember that even though we are in an English class, they should still be proud of where they come from. So, building that dual identity is key for keeping them happy and focused.

Writing tasks are another way that teachers use students' cultural knowledge to introduce new concepts and to help students make connections between what they know and what they are learning. When I observed Mary's class, for ten minutes at the beginning of instruction time, students responded to the following prompt that required them to draw from their own experiences:

*Sometimes I wish my family would .....*

*I have a \_\_\_\_\_ relationship with my family because \_\_\_\_\_.*

The class then proceeded with a lesson about familial expectations.

**Mary** explains why she uses freewrites with her students:

Freewrites tend to connect somehow. So instead of, I mean it is always connected to the content or whatever we are doing in class. But freewrites tend to be questions that are a little bit more open-ended that typically have personal connections or some type of personal narrative writing that connects to concepts we are doing in class. It is an easy

way to kind of get to ---one a start to the class to have a little bit of writing time, but then also a way to learn about students.

### *Use of Native Languages*

Language is the vehicle through which culture is transmitted. As such, all the study participants allow the use of the native language in the English learning classroom. However, they hold differing opinions as to how much of a role the native language should play.

**Andrew** argued that unless the students are at the beginner level of learning English literacy skills, he does not encourage them to use the native language in class. He stated that in the instances he has seen the native language being used in his class, “it is to help another student who is really not getting it.” Andrew suggested that instead of students translating reading texts into their native language in order to comprehend them, students should be equipped with the tools they need to apply context clues. He added that students should be taught the equivalent of sight words (as happens in the lower grades) as well as reading strategies and problem-solving skills. **Andrew** explained:

Students need to be taught the tools to be able to figure out the meaning of words on their own. That is what I see my job as being mostly... Using their native language to look up words defeats the purpose of learning how to read. I think people have to learn how to read. I think each language has a different tool kit. They have to be taught that tool kit in English - how to read, and if they are using their native language too much or translators too much, then they are not learning to be problem solvers on their own.

**Lucy**, who teaches beginner English learners, sees the importance of using the native language with her group of students, especially because they have very limited English proficiency. During one of the classroom observations, the students were reviewing vocabulary



that they had learned the previous day. Lucy told the students that she would say the word and the students would work in pairs to figure out the spelling of the word and write it down on a teacher-provided dry erase board. As the teacher dictated the vocabulary, some of the students would discuss the word's spelling in their native language (most of the students were Spanish speakers). A lot of the students struggled to determine which vowels to use when spelling the words because some Spanish vowels are pronounced differently in English.

After this exercise, students reviewed how to write complete simple sentences using subjects and predicates. Lucy reminded the students to underline the subject once and the verb twice. The sentences she provided the students followed the Spanish sentence word order to make it easier for the students to see the similarities between their native language and the English language.

Thereafter, the students read a short story about a visit to the doctor. When the teacher asked the students to read the word *patient*, both the Spanish speaking and the Burmese speaking students relied heavily on their native languages to try and decode the pronunciation of the word. When she saw that the students were struggling to understand the story, she first translated the words into Spanish because she speaks the language, then she encouraged the Burmese and Swahili speaking students to use Google Translate as a tool to help them better comprehend the story. Later, when discussing the lesson with me, **Lucy** said:

My English language 1 kids, they barely speak any English. Many times, I have to use Google Translate. I use images. Whatever that can help them understand. Sometimes, I create a story. I use a story to help them understand.

I happened to observe **Mary's** sheltered English 2 class when the students were writing a critical analysis essay about *The Great Gatsby* text. One of the Spanish speaking students was

not proficient in writing in English. She was comfortable expressing her thoughts in Spanish but not in English. Therefore, she would first write her thoughts in paragraph form in Spanish using Google Translate before copying and pasting the English translation into her Word document.

This demonstrated the important and assistive role technology plays in helping students, who otherwise would be excluded from the learning process, participate in relevant and meaningful ways such as using their native languages to complete assignments. This is significant because it separates language proficiency from content. In many instances, students know the content and can explain it in their native languages. However, when they have to demonstrate their learning in a language they are unfamiliar with, they are rendered incompetent because of language barriers. When this happens, it is possible for a teacher to assume that the student is not learning when in actual fact, the student is learning but does not know enough of the target language to use it to complete the assignment.

### ***Teaching Materials and Critical Literacy***

Learning resources are another important aspect of culturally relevant and responsive teaching. When selecting resources for whole class instruction, the participating teachers prefer to use materials that students can relate to and establish connections with because it allows the students to activate schema, anticipate content, and establish parallels between their lives and those of the characters.

According to the participants, there are some issues to consider when selecting text for diverse classrooms. The first consideration is whether the text is accessible to and comprehensible for the students. For Andrew, the cultural content of a text does not supersede text comprehension. When selecting class texts, he considers whether the themes in the texts are

universal and relatable to his students so as to provide them with an opportunity to share their own similar experiences that compare to those espoused in the texts. **Andrew** further explained:

If I give them something too hard but it is international, they won't get that international message. You know, they have to understand it for it to be meaningful...So can the students comprehend it? Are the themes relatable?"

Another consideration is the universality of themes and whether students can relate to those themes as well as the text. These connections can be with self, the community, the world, or even with their own cultures. Andrew and Lucy noted that it is very difficult to choose cultural texts that represent the various cultures in a classroom, especially if the students came from all over the world. In such cases, some students were bound to feel left out, and that is why they preferred to choose texts with universal, relatable themes. **Lucy** too expressed the challenge of choosing texts for diverse classrooms. She addressed this challenge by trying "to use texts that are more neutral so that all students can build connections." **Andrew** summed the experience as follows:

It is hard to touch on every single culture first of all, and then if I do like a Latinx story, which I have done, Sandra Cisneros is one good example, but sometimes when you do those texts, students from other cultures feel left out. If there is a more universal theme, and they can all share their stories, then no one is left out. So, does this text provide opportunities for them to share similar situations in their own cultures?

Yet another consideration is the process of text selection followed by the institution. For a couple of the participants, Lucy and Mary, the professional learning communities they belong to decide on the classroom texts. Both Lucy and Mary teach English 1, and their cohort decided to use *Gaby, A Girl in Pieces* as the class text. **Mary** explains that the book was chosen because

it is “looking at culture with regard to age. Age culture- that is a YA [young adult] text that is written in journal format.” Once the text has been chosen, it is up to the teacher to decide how to use the text in class so that students can both relate and connect to the text. Lucy explains that students “love reading that story” and can relate to some of the themes. To help students make connections, **Lucy** provides an example of some of the questions she asks her students that relate to some of the topics and themes in the story:

What would happen in your culture if a girl got pregnant? And they gave me so many interesting things like my African kids would tell me, “Oh no you can’t. You will be kicked out of the house. Nobody will help you.” And the Spanish-speaking kids would tell me, “Nothing. Nothing will happen.”

The illustration above shows how a teacher can provide students with an opportunity to use their own cultural lenses to interpret and evaluate events and themes in a story whose cultural setting is similar to or different from their own.

Another factor to consider is student choice - whether students have requested to read a particular text and how students’ experiences can be leveraged in teaching the text and engaging in critical inquiry. **Mary** recounted her experience with teaching *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. She said:

Sometimes, a more typical high school text is *The Great Gatsby* [by F. Scott Fitzgerald] that I am teaching my English 2 class. I debated throwing it out, but I had students who actually loved it and these students told their friends about it. Their friends looked forward to reading it in my class. The students asked, “Why don’t you teach it anymore?” So, I try to still bring in connections. So, I paired it with Childish Gambino’s “This is America” and try to bring in personal connections ...So students have put up covers

around [the classroom] because they designed book covers that they thought would represent what America is like today [see appendix C]. The essential question for that is how does *The Great Gatsby* celebrate or critique modern America? Throughout the whole text, they are connecting it to America today and their perceptions of it. So, even though that text hasn't changed, when I teach it, I try to leverage their experiences and perspectives on what it is currently like.

Critical literacy is one more factor to consider when analyzing teaching materials. For example, when engaging with a text, readers merge their understanding and experiences of the world with those of the author and the text. **Mary** explained that this is true of all readers:

The reader coming to the text has something to offer the text. Any reader can come to any text and bring their life to it. Then they start to have an actual dialogue with the text - why is this negative, and why is it that I feel that. And so, they start to draw connections and bring their voice to the text as well. And then they search for patterns. When they search for patterns within their responses, they get into that level of analysis. But they begin with where they are and who they are.

Encouraging students to engage with a text in whichever way they choose helps them to see that the text is not absolute, that they have something to offer, and that their voices and ideas have a place in the curriculum.

Therefore, the factors to consider in choosing culturally relevant and responsive teaching materials include whether the materials are accessible and comprehensible, whether the topics and themes are universal, whether students can relate to and connect with the themes, the text selection process, student choice, and elements of critical literacy.

### ***Critical Inquiry***

All the participating teachers engage their students in critical inquiry, whether at the end of a unit of study to extend learning or as an integral part of the unit. One of the times that the teachers intentionally use inquiry strategies with their students is at the beginning of a unit to establish relevance. During one of the times I observed Andrew teach, he was introducing the students to a short story called “The Third Level” by Jack Finney. The story is about a character who travelled back in time. Before the class began reading the story, Andrew asked students the following question: *If it were possible to travel back in time, what place and time in history would you choose?* Many of the students verbally participated and mentioned things they would like to change and places they would like to go to. By considering how they might act if they were in the same position as the main character in the story, the students were able to anticipate what they were about to read and to relate the events in the story to their lives.

Another way for students to engage in critical inquiry is by extending their learning at the end of a unit. Teachers provide students with opportunities to further investigate concepts and themes through individual or group projects. These projects require students to apply their learning in real life situations and draw parallels between what they have learned in class and what they observe in the world. **Andrew** illustrated below:

Group projects are when I introduce them to new concepts that are culturally relevant. But that is at the end of the unit. I mean, by the time we get to that point, the only expanding of their knowledge, from the themes and ideas from the story, come from the outside world, Like real world. For example, a big focus of one of the learning standards is to do comparative literature, to create conclusions based on two stories that touch on similar themes. I do two stories first, and then they do group and/or individual projects.

They have to make connections between the characters in the stories, which I think is very beneficial because it lends itself easier to connecting to their own lives. They have to make claims which are a little more of a stretch and so to justify those claims they have to support them with evidence from what they know.

During one of my classroom observations, Andrew's students were working on group projects. One of the projects asked students to continue a story from where it had stopped. A group of three boys - one from Eritrea, one from Nepal, and one from the Congo - worked together. The students had read a story about traveling back in time and they were supposed to continue the story for another two pages. The boys found a way to infuse their shared interest and love for soccer into the activity. They wrote about playing with children from that time period, teaching the children the rules of soccer and establishing goal posts, and if no balls were available, showing the children how to make soccer balls using trash bags, old newspapers, old rags, and strings. This example demonstrates the value of students' experiences and how those experiences can meaningfully be infused into analytical critical thinking and writing strategies in the classroom.

It is important to keep in mind that the inquiry projects students engage in do not have to be complex. They can be about activities that students and others in their orbit perform regularly. As part of the inquiry process, students craft questions and conduct primary research to answer those questions. **Lucy** offered the following illustration:

With my English 1 beginner class, when I was teaching the *Daily Routines* unit, I had my students write down ten questions they could ask a person outside school like their mom, dad, aunt, uncle or cousin, whoever, or ask a person at school - it could be a teacher or another student, preferably a teacher. That's another way for them to get to know, for

example, their aunt. They had to ask questions like what time do you usually get up?

What time do you go to school or to work? When do you have meals? Questions like that.

**Mary** also uses guiding questions throughout a unit of study to engage students in critical inquiry. She provided the following example:

I[n] English 1, I think the unit topics are around place, identity. The essential question kind of guides them through ...how have places impacted your identity? And then the prompts and the texts we read and the writing we do and the discussions we have all center around guiding questions. Those guiding questions are: What does it mean to be a community of learners? What is my role in the community that is now starting? How do places and community impact identity? What makes up identity? Why is identity important? How do people's cultural expectations and experiences impact identity?

Those so far are the questions that have been guiding us.

### ***Building Caring Relationships***

Many English learners have a lot to contend with in their day-to day lives as they try to navigate new environments and experiences, whether they be academic, socio-cultural or even emotional. When teachers get to know their students and show them that they care about them, it enhances students' lived experiences. One of the ways teachers can get to know their students is by providing them with opportunities to share about themselves. **Lucy** has students bring to class either a family photo or "something they are really passionate about." She continued to say, "This is a way for me to get to know my students and I have them write about the photos." Through this exercise, the students get to share the aspects of themselves and their lives that they are really proud of.



Additionally, Mary gets to know her students through qualitative surveys. The surveys examine how “much they feel seen, heard, accepted, and that they belong in the classroom.”

**Mary** provided an example of the experience of one of the students who participated in the survey:

So I had a student who was taking my class for the second time. He had failed my class the first time. It was a student that I would have said wasn't interested in school. He actually scored himself really low on our survey, on our climate and belonging survey, and so I started to have one-on-one conferences with him. I started to make positive phone calls home in Swahili [through an interpreter], which was the language he speaks at home. So, I started these interventions based on the things he scored himself low on and helped him to choose a book that he was interested in, a topic he was interested in. By the end, he was passing my class. He was facilitating and leading discussions. He finished the book two weeks before the deadline and then came back. But the biggest success for me was he passed, he graduated, and at the end of the year he came and said, “For the first time ever, everything is going right, I have friends, I feel like I belong, I feel like I am supposed to be here.”

When teachers affirm students' cultures and value them, teachers demonstrate to the students that they care about them. **Andrew** noted that high school students face issues of identity, so he takes every opportunity to “point out positive aspects of their culture that I find interesting, then it kinda brings them back and lets them remember that even though we are in an English class, they should still be proud of where they come from.” Thus, cultural affirmation contributes to students' self-esteem and pride in where they come from.

Affirming students' cultures also communicates to the students that it is okay to have a duo identity - the one they already have as members of their cultures and the new identity they are forming as members of the new society, in this case the United States. Andrew insisted that "building that dual identity is key for keeping them happy and focused." This approach affirmed to the students, especially immigrant students, that it was not an act of betrayal to their culture if they embraced the new practices of their new home.

Teachers also showed their students that they cared when they demonstrated empathy towards them. Even when teachers had not had the same experiences that some of their students had had, they could still demonstrate empathy toward the students and do all they could to alleviate further trauma. **Andrew** explained that "our students have gone through trauma that I could never really understand, but feeling incompetent because of language is something that is very real and close, and I can absolutely understand that". Having lived in a country that spoke a language he did not understand, Andrew is able to empathize with his students' struggles with language learning. He stated that inability to communicate in the English language might make students feel incompetent, which can add to any trauma they may have undergone in the past.

When students feel safe, they are more open to share about themselves. Mary has experienced the benefit of providing students with a safe environment where they can freely share some of what is happening in their lives. When students share what is going on in their lives with a trusted teacher, that teacher is able to connect them with a professional, such as a social worker or another support professional. However, when students do not have a space for sharing such experiences, they internalize them which can affect their learning. To illustrate, **Mary** narrated the experience of one of her students who had been failing her English class:

One of the things the student said was: “Everything is going right, but I still feel like something is going wrong. I am just not happy deep down inside”. So, we were able to get socio-emotional help, support, and interventions.

**Lucy** also creates a safe space where students know that they are seen and valued. In return, students share their experiences. Lucy provided an example of how one of her students that witnessed a shooting outside of school did not want to seek help but was willing to talk to her. The situation was so traumatizing for the student that he was visibly upset and started to hurt himself. Consequently, **Lucy** stepped in to:

Seek help because he didn’t want to talk to anyone. He said, “No, Miss, I don’t want any help.” But as a teacher, it is important for me to report the situation and to have a social worker work with him to help him go through this difficult time even if the kid says, “No, I do not need help,” because that kind of resistance is not going to help him.

When students know that they can trust the teacher and that the teacher has their best interests at heart, then they are likely to start to care about their academic performance. **Andrew** illustrated this as follows:

My students have to be improving in their language every day, and I feel like that philosophy has successfully been communicated, like, my students want that the most too. And so, they don’t argue with me about what we do in class; they don’t fight me about the activities and say that they are stupid because they know and trust me. More than anything, I see a lot of evidence with this when I do individual conferences. When I individually conference with them, and they see their test, and they see that they missed a lot of questions, sometimes they will just start crying.

A willingness to help students by meeting their needs communicates to them that a teacher cares about them. This sometimes takes the form of advocacy as in Andrew's case.

**Andrew** explained:

I fight hard as an advocate for ELL [English language learner] kids ... specifically when I see them not improving and just floating on by. It really makes me upset because I know that deep down, those kids feel like crap when they reflect on how much they learned that day or they wonder whether school is worth it. I have a zero-tolerance policy for that.

### ***Cultural Competence and Sharing***

Helping students build, maintain and share cultural competence is one of the features of culturally relevant and responsive teaching. All the teachers who participated in this study agreed that students should be provided opportunities to investigate their cultures and share their knowledge with other people. In fact, to emphasize the importance of cultural competence, **Lucy** shared the experience of one of her students:

I was talking to a student from Burma. I asked her, "You speak Burmese, right?" She said, "Yes" And then I asked, "Do you read and write in Burmese?" She said, "No, I can't. My family can but I can't anymore." You could tell that she was a little bit embarrassed and disappointed that she cannot read and write in her language.

Some of the ways that Lucy's students demonstrate cultural competence is by making infographics about themselves. She has students bring in artifacts they consider to be valuable or meaningful to them. **Lucy** explains that it is a project that all students can participate in because "no matter what culture you are from, you can all do this, and you can share with other people the perspectives that you have for your culture, for your family, for whatever."

When students make the infographics and display them, they not only share with other students in their class, but they also share them with any other person that walks into their classroom. **Lucy** explained below:

And I also have students from other classes come into my classroom because their friends might be here, and then they would come in and look at their photos and say, “Oh, I know this person.” And then they will ask me, “Miss, is this person in your class?” And I say, “Yes, she is in my sheltered English 1 class or she is in my this class.” And then they go, “Yeah, I know him.” They get really excited.

Andrew shared an example of how he provided opportunities for his students to demonstrate cultural competence and share what they know with their classmates. **Andrew** explained as follows:

We read a folktale and then I asked them to model a folktale from their own culture in English as an expansion activity. They were using the folktale we had read to acquaint them with the structure of it and the progression of the story and then they were to apply that while they attempted to translate a folktale with their group and communicate that in English. Then they would present the folktale to the class. I had one student retell a folktale that her mom used to tell her all the time about Burma. Apparently, the Chin people from the northern part of Burma, the reason why their home area is so mountainous is because there was this big monster that was using a big ax to destroy all the mountains in Burma, in the whole country, as he was making his way north. The reason why the Chin still have mountains is because there was a famous Chin warrior who defeated the big monster. So only this Chin person was able to defeat it in all of

Burma, and so it is a prideful folktale, and it also goes into the culture and gives more information about the atmosphere they come from. It is very nice.

When such cultural stories are shared, they keep the cultures alive and educate not only the other students but also the teacher. During one of my observations, when Andrew's class was getting ready to practice English pronouns using a story about Rohingya refugees from Burma, he started by asking students what they knew about the situation. Some of the students from Burma and Nepal talked about the persecution of the refugees in the hands of authorities. Here, Andrew was able to draw on students' knowledge of what was happening in their home regions and used that knowledge in the classroom. When Andrew went to the world map, pointed out the region, and attempted to pronounce the names of the countries in his American accent, the students were quick to correct his pronunciation of the names of their home countries. He acknowledged the correction and asked the students to teach him the correct pronunciation, which he repeated after them several times. This exchange demonstrated that Andrew acknowledged his students' expertise in the matter at hand, willingly tapped into that expertise, and provided time and space for students to share their knowledge.

Mary also provides opportunities for students to explore their cultures and share that knowledge with others. She intentionally designs a unit that blends narrative storytelling and food. The following was **Mary's** account:

And so, we talk through food kinda like an entry point so it is a little bit easier, accessible and move on into sharing around cultures and stories and identities. So we will read books in literature circles which give each student a job to do, but also allows for more communal collaborative work. And I have students from more collectivist cultures versus individualistic cultures. It kind of unites both of those needs because there are individual

roles and then the team comes together and builds understanding together. But then they use those texts as mentors for their own writing when they do their own creative writing or connections. It doesn't have to be a food, like a stereotypical food from their culture; it can be any food they have memories around that is important to them and then they bring it in and focus on storytelling. And then we do oral storytelling instead of writing. We will bring in food from our stories and we eat the food together and we focus on how to tell the stories that we connected to them- whether it is I have a special memory of this food or I tried to make this one time and it went horribly - it can be anything.

In addition, **Mary's** students also work on the *Power of Place* unit where students choose a place that is important to them and their life, and they get an opportunity to share their writing with not just their classmates, but also with other high school students from two other metro high schools through Flipgrid, an online sharing platform.

As demonstrated by the examples above, the participating teachers provide opportunities for students to write about their cultures, display artifacts about themselves, share food with each other, retell folktales about their cultures, and narrate their experiences, knowledge, and memories. All these activities create spaces for students to share what matters to them with others.

### ***Classroom Expectations and Environment***

Even though the participants acknowledged the importance of setting classroom expectations early on in the school year, they went about the process differently. Andrew and Lucy created the expectations and then explained them to their students. On the other hand, Mary co-creates her classroom expectations together with the students. **Mary** offered the following explanation:

We do start the year off with a classroom contract that is co-created. We talk about the US philosophies around individualism. I don't know if philosophy is the right word, but how individualism in the US is, and how there are also more collective cultures. We talk about the difference between the two. And we use the Ubuntu philosophy - I am because we are. Then they create their personal goals and also "we are" goals of how they want the class to look like. So, they almost help create the class culture.

All participants expressed the importance of having equitable classroom expectations for their students that are not necessarily determined by the individual cultures represented in the classroom. In other words, classroom management is not differentiated according to the cultures of the students in the class. Instead, the teacher and the students create a classroom culture that governs class norms. **Andrew** said, "I think I have all the same rules for all the same students. All the same expectations for all the same students."

Nonetheless, there are circumstances under which Andrew adjusts the rules to accommodate the needs of a student. **Andrew** recounted an incident where a student wanted to be treated differently.

I had a student from Latin America who came to me once during a conference and said, "Teacher, I want you to be meaner to me." His idea of a father figure is someone who is stern and loud. I mean, I don't think that is what fathers have to be....He said he would be more willing to do his work if I was meaner to him. I didn't know what to do at first with that, but I guess I kinda adjusted a little bit and gave him what he wanted a little bit.

Lucy cautioned that there is a fine line between respecting and honoring students' backgrounds and establishing a classroom environment that fosters learning for all students and peaceful cohabitation with each other. **Lucy** expounded on her views as follows:



Because [students] all have different backgrounds, it means that you will have to develop different ways to suit their needs. However, I do think there is a fine line there. Because although they are from different cultures, once they come to America, once they want to do high school, there is a unified way; there is a standard way to do it. So, even if you are from a different culture, it doesn't mean that you can stand up in the middle of the classroom and walk around and disrupt other people. So there are still things that we need to help them understand. But by helping them understand, we are not trying to show them that what they believe is inferior or what we believe is superior, if it makes sense.

So, for example, if they are walking around in the classroom, instead of telling them that this is not good, what we need to say is that it is not the tradition that we have here. Maybe that is what they were used to when they were in their country. They just stand up and talk to other people and not listen to teachers sometimes because the teachers are also used to it. One of my students told me that when he went to school, the teacher could just teach and other students could just talk at the same time. But then I needed to help him understand that "it might be true in your culture, but I am afraid when you are in America, if you are doing school in America, you have to respect the rules here. Just like when we go to your country, we also need to respect the rules in your country as well." I feel like there is a fine line, otherwise, it would be really difficult to teach in the classroom. I do think that that focused instruction time needs to be very well managed so that all the students can get the content knowledge at the same pace.

Mary echoes Lucy's views because she has had similar experiences with students. Mary referenced the teachings of Dr. Sharroky Hollie when explaining how she handles situations where student behavior is incongruent with the established classroom norms that the students

themselves helped to create. **Mary** offered the following description that explained how she implements Dr. Sharroky's teachings:

The two main things [Dr. Sharroky] talks about are teaching strategies; what he calls VABBing, which is knowing how to validate and affirm the cultures that students bring into the classroom and then bridging those. For example, if you have a student who has a behavior ...I have a student who likes to walk around and greet every single student as they come in. Rather than saying, "Go sit down," and kinda send them the message that "you are being disruptive. Whatever you are doing is not allowed in here." Validating and affirming: "I know how you love to greet everyone in your community when you come in. You are so inclusive." And then bridge into why we have- it is a little more of a strategy around how to just be a person in the same space together, not content and text, though it is a piece of it as well, but that is the piece you can always touch. And then bridge and build bridges and build until you reach whatever the culture of the classroom is.

I did have a student ask me the other day, "Why don't you just hit us because that is what we are used to from the school we came from?" Then I got to say, "Okay, I love that you want there to be structure here..." So, I tried my VABBing like validating. Okay, I love that you want a consequence because you want to uphold strong behavior, but in this class we do it another way.

To create a sense of belonging in their working space, the teachers hang students' pictures, artifacts, and completed assignments on the walls. Lucy's classroom is decorated with students' family pictures. Mary's classroom is decorated with students' pictures too and information about where the students are from. In fact, during one of my observations in Mary's

classroom, I walked up to a student and asked him where he was from. Instead of answering my question directly, he pointed to the wall and directed me to his picture and a replica of the flag of his country of origin. After giving me time to deduce where he was from to no avail, he proudly stated that he was from Argentina and was surprised that I did not recognize the country's flag right away. Even though Andrew does not display his students' photographs, he nevertheless references the map of the world hanging on one of the walls in his classroom. During an observation, I watched him use the map to point out the setting of the story about Rohingya refugees and gave students who came from that region an opportunity to talk about their home countries.

### ***Critical Reflection***

All the participants provided opportunities for their students to engage in critical reflection of their own cultures. Lucy understood providing students with opportunities to critically reflect on their culture to mean "how can they understand that their culture is not the only culture that exists in the world? Right? Each culture has its shiny parts and parts that are not so shiny. You know what I am saying?"

Lucy reminds her students about cultural equity and reiterates that no culture is better than the other. She has had moments when she has had to intervene in students' discussions to remind them of that fact. **Lucy** provided the following example:

In class, I sometimes have to mention that, yes, this is what you believe in. This student believes in something different. However, it doesn't mean that one person's belief is better than the other. It just means that people have different beliefs and this world has many opportunities, many different things coexist. We do not want to say that what I believe is better than yours. You want to respect what other people believe as well. I

would say critical reflection comes in those moments when people have different beliefs, and they try to argue over other people and I try to put them back into an equal place and help them to understand the importance of respecting other people's opinions and cultures.

Andrew also encourages his students to view all cultures as equal. **Andrew** provided the following example of how he has seen cultural critical reflection play out in his class:

For example, I don't have any Chinese students in my room, but if I mention China, many of my students will say, "Oh they eat dogs there." That will be their initial reaction; that will be their initial response. But their expectations on others is that other people should know what not to say to them, like what stereotypical things other people shouldn't tell them to their face. I think that culturally responsive teaching has its base in avoiding assumptions and building connections and asking meaningful questions about the culture.

In addition, Andrew engages his students in critical reflection through learning activities. He highlights how literature, which illuminates the human condition and teaches universal themes, can be a mirror through which students can critically analyze their behaviors and dispositions, and in the process, engage in critical reflection. **Andrew** provided the following explanation:

Most of the things that we read touch on human behavior and our faults as individuals and bad decisions we make and it all creates conflict. I feel like some conflict is universal. Like wanting to find success is universally cultural and also personal too. Through our discussions of stories and through analysis and through the writing, students are reflecting on themselves and I think a lot of students are learning from the characters'

mistakes. I think that shouldn't be undervalued. If I overtly try to engage my students in thinking critically about what they do right or wrong and how to improve as individuals and reflecting on problems in their culture, I feel like it is going to fail. It is going to be me preaching at them. But when I give them opportunities to read stories, they are coming up with these conclusions on their own. They own the ideas instead of me telling them the ideas.

**Mary** also emphasizes the issue of cultural equity with her students. She asserted that students need to practice the concept of culture switching. She explained this to mean that students should be dexterous when navigating cultures, and exercise situational appropriateness. **Mary** further explained:

Global dexterity is where we want students to be able to make intentional and skillful shifts from one language or culture to another without abandoning their home culture or language. The validation is in not elevating one or the other culture. But how do we navigate that? Going back and forth between cultures, teaching students what Hollie calls situational appropriateness.

**Mary** also provided an example where, in one of her classes, a male student from Nepal wondered aloud to a fellow Nepali male student whether they had culture. Mary overheard them and joined in the conversation and said to the students: "Sometimes it takes being reflective or recognizing our differences to start to understand more about ourselves." This helped the boy reflect upon the concept of culture and how his culture is unique. Therefore, all the participants espouse cultural equity and are active in ensuring that their students are not only aware of cultural equity, but that they also critically reflect on their own cultural beliefs and practices.

### *Community Connections*

All the teachers participating in this study expressed the importance of facilitating connections with the community. Both Andrew and Lucy placed more emphasis in within school community building whereas Mary emphasized establishing connections with the outside community.

Both Andrew and Lucy have students in their respective classes work with each other to build community. Lucy teaches beginner English learners whereas Andrew teaches more proficient English learners in the junior and senior grades. **Andrew** explained below how he pairs his students with those in Lucy's class:

My direct involvement with community building probably is best shown through collaborations. I will have my most advanced students meet with her very beginning freshman students. My students become the teachers for the freshmen. One of my students works with one or two of her students, and we try to pair them by language similarity. We do a very basic activity, but students get to learn; they get to be reminded of where they came from (academically) and they get to see the struggles they used to go through. I have never had a bad experience with that. You can have students just before the first time they do it say, "Oh, I don't want to be a teacher. I am not a good teacher. I don't want to be doing that." And then they get into it and I say, "You want to do that again?" and they say, "Yeah. That was so much fun."

In addition to collaborating with Andrew, Lucy focuses on teaching her students how to connect with the wider American society they live in. Based on classroom discussions and student writing, Lucy concludes that the students already have support within their communities

through their families, their churches, and their friends. Therefore, she does not see the need to include community related events in the curriculum. **Lucy** stated:

I am not so concerned about the festivals because my students have their own communities to celebrate their festivals with. They have festivals that we as outsiders will not know much about because they always have their own people to celebrate with. They always write about it all the time.

However, based on her conversations with students, Lucy determined that what students really needed was to be taught how to connect with and succeed in the wider American society, which is so much different from what they know. She provided examples of some of the things students want to be able to do such as ordering food in a restaurant, answering the phone appropriately, and how to pay their bills. Below are some of the concerns **Lucy's** students have expressed to her:

Some students complain about not knowing how to order food. Sometimes you have to also show them a menu of a restaurant and help them order. If you want a burger, this is what you say. If you want to order pizza, this is what you say. That can be something big for them already. That is something they are interested in at school. I do sometimes feel concerned about whether they know how to --- For example, if they get a call from someone to talk about their bills, or if a university calls them to have an interview, will they be prepared to answer those questions? Will they be able to understand what [the interviewers] are talking about? I guess that is my concern; I guess how to survive in a foreign country.

Mary, on the other hand, tries to connect her students with what is happening in the society based on what they are learning in class. In the past, she has arranged for subject matter

experts to visit her students and help the students make text to world connections. **Mary** recalled the following connection that she facilitated:

When we read *The Great Gatsby*, there was a documentarian who came into our classroom. He was doing a segment on *Redream*, which is a documentary about how the American dream is changing. He followed a lot of immigrants and gave some perspectives. He was here to share his resources and come visit the class. So that was a way to connect to something that was happening.

### ***Sociopolitical Consciousness***

All the participants acknowledge the importance of disrupting the status quo to benefit their students. However, they do not go about it on a grand scale. Rather, they seek to effect change gradually in the manner that is most meaningful for their students and their communities. One of the ways they all disrupt the status quo is by teaching English to non-native speakers so that they can function successfully in the new country.

In addition to teaching English to her students, Mary also showcases the work of other young people who are making change. Her intention is that those stories inspire her students to desire to make a difference in their own ways. During an observation, the students were working on a research unit and they were using resources from *We the Future*. Later, during a follow up interview, **Mary** explained this approach to research as follows:

One of the only ways that I could think of that has a direct connection is connecting to *We the Future* [from amplifier.org]. These are posters that they designed (pointing to posters that adorn the classroom walls). Each one represents a young person who is making some kind of impact in the world currently. There are actual readings and units and resources that support each one. So far in my class, we started with - I had them



choose which poster they wanted to start with. They started with “We the future keep our families together”. We learned about this young activist and what she is doing to fight against separation, family separations at the border.

And then students so far, what they have done in regard to connecting it to themselves is they have started to brainstorm things they are passionate about and things that they want to make an impact around... And we have talked that it doesn't have to be something major like you started a huge campaign. It is like how can you live it out in the hallway? Or how can you live out that future that you want to be in the classroom? It can be in little ways. Each one of those units does connect to resources and things, like hey, if this is something you are interested in, here are resources.

Since many of the English learners came from regions where they were either directly affected by atrocities or witnessed them, they sometimes experience trauma. Rather than ignore the situation and maintain the status quo, **Andrew** takes it upon himself to act:

I go with students to the social worker or the psychologist to discuss big psychological trauma they have experienced that they want to work through and they feel like their families really don't have the acceptance for or understanding of how mainstream psychological problems can be in today's society. I work very closely with Mrs. M. I probably talk to her about particular students three or four times a year. Also, she will come talk to my students quite often about programs they are able to do.

Andrew also mentioned that the students themselves participate in activities that help to better their communities. The students step up to help alleviate hunger in their communities by participating in a community food network that distributes food to low income households such as their own. Andrew observed, “A huge portion of the volunteers for Harvesters are English

learners.” Andrew encourages his students to participate in the program and in return, they earn community service hours.

In addition to food distribution, the students work to ensure that their communities are not alienated due to language barriers and therefore participate in language translation services. These services are required to help students access resources, include parents in the conversation about school, and during parent-teacher services at the high school and at other feeder schools within the school district.

Lucy sees language barrier as such an impediment that, if not addressed, serves to exclude her students from participating in the mainstream society and accessing resources. As a result, she has created an ESL (English as a Second Language) club that offers translation services. Lucy offered the following commentary about the need for translation and interpreter services:

I think English learners don't know that they have access to different resources at all because they do not speak the language. Say, if there is a school announcement saying, if you need free WIFI, you just need to go to room 5 and sign up for it. That doesn't mean anything to my students because they don't understand what it is saying. My ESL club is working on creating a brochure with questions and answers. Like, if I need eyeglasses, where do I need to go to get glasses? If I need this, what do I do? A list of ten to twelve questions and answers to help students locate resources if they need anything like food, if they need stationery, if they need any glasses. And we intend to translate that into different languages so that when students come, they will be able to have a brochure in their own language and they will be able to read it easily. If not themselves because some

of them are illiterate in their own languages, at least someone from their family will be able to read it and tell them.

Andrew insisted that “the translation groups are helping to build better communities as well. That is a huge ESL population that takes part in that and we provide great incentives for that too.” Therefore, learning to speak English and engaging in language translation services are not just about helping the individual student, but they are also about enriching communities and overcoming socioeconomic obstacles.

### ***Standards-based Curriculum***

The school at which the participants work requires teachers to use the state mandated learning standards to guide their instruction. All the participants indicated that this requirement did not in any way inhibit their implementation of culturally relevant and responsive teaching strategies.

Lucy observed that the standards are very broad in the way they are written which gives teachers a lot of room for interpretation. The following is how **Lucy** described the impact standards have on her teaching practices:

The standards are very broad. They don't really tell me what I can't do. They only tell you what you should cover...Because the standards are usually broad, for example my English language 1 class, one of the standards says something like, students can write texts. That standard does not really confine me in any way whatsoever. Write texts. What kind of texts? So, when I decide what the students can write about, for example, the *All About Me Project*, I can make it culturally responsive. It doesn't really hinder my practices of culturally responsive teaching. So, it doesn't really bother me.

Andrew acknowledged that the learning standards are written in such a way that he “can meet the standard using any text. Any appropriate text is capable of meeting the standard.” He, however, had to take into account the learning gaps some of his students might have that might hinder their mastery of the standard. **Andrew** expressed the challenge as follows:

We measure the student’s ability to perform the standard through assessments, and the school district provides very broad ways of modifying assessments for [English learners]. The modifications provided by the district and the *GVC (Grade-level Viable Curriculum developed by the school district for implementation in all schools in the district)* ... seem vague overall and in this way, when administrators come into my room and they kinda see how I have interpreted the standards to fit the students’ language level and how I interpret the modifications to fit what we would consider grade level appropriate assessments, they seem to be happy with what I am doing. Personally, I feel like I never really get to do as high level work as I would like because the room is full of so many students with many different types of learning gaps and there are just so many inconsistencies in their levels. Like we have a newcomer coming in, they are already 17 years old, they can only be in school till they are 21, so they have to learn English and pass all high school classes in 4 years, which is really difficult. And we don’t have rooms in classes for all these kinds of levels, so like that kid is going to be in the same room with someone who moved to the country when they were in third grade, who has had many years of English instruction and practice.

Mary noted that even though the school district mandates that all teachers use the standards, teachers can still exercise a lot of freedom in how they implement them. **Mary** explained below:

The standards are things that may be less negotiable, but how you get there and what texts you bring in, there is a little bit more freedom within that. I do bring a lot of visual texts and music and things into the classroom. I think the freedom-within-form kind of helps how I've creatively grouped standards too. The ones that I always question and don't really have any answer around but don't always feel good about are some of the language standards ...And that might be because I never really quite know how explicitly I should assess standards around grammar and punctuation.

As Mary stated above, given that she works with students for whom English is an additional language, she struggles with how rigidly she should assess their English grammar and punctuation skills, especially because the same standards are used for both native and non-native speakers of English.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question sought to investigate what motivates teachers to engage in culturally relevant education. In answer to this question, I wanted to know what in their past, present and future aspirations motivates them to implement culturally relevant education practices within their classrooms. Even though training in culturally relevant and responsive strategies was offered to all teachers in the school district where the school participating in this study is located, the school district does not actively monitor teachers to assess if they are implementing the strategies in their classrooms. Therefore, it is incumbent upon individual teachers to exercise agency in incorporating culturally relevant and responsive strategies in their teaching.

### *Past Motivators*

All the participants can point to past experiences that motivate them to be culturally relevant and responsive with their students. **Andrew** has had the experience of living in a foreign country whose language he did not understand:

Living in a foreign country for several months on my own with zero language knowledge was very eye opening for me. I remember getting off the plane and hoping someone was there to pick me up because I did not know where I was going. I'd never felt like that before. I know that many of my kids feel like that a lot. What I do know is that the thing that bothered me most when I was in China was my inability to communicate the things that I needed.

**Lucy** grew up in Asia and talked about how her experiences as a student in her country of origin shaped the expectations she has for her students. **Lucy** explained:

When I went to school, I remember some of my classes were difficult for teachers, and my teachers had to set rules, very firm rules to make sure that the students knew what to expect in a classroom; know how to behave in a classroom. So, I feel like I do a pretty good job showing my students how to do school. I have rules and consequences on my wall, even for English 1 students -students who have just come to America. I try to use Spanish to explain to them, "Okay you are in school. These are the things that are expected that you need to follow when you are at school and you don't want to be in trouble because if you don't follow the rules, there will be consequences.

In addition to her experiences as a student, her travels to different parts of the world also influenced her worldview and prepared her to work with a diverse group of students. **Lucy** explained:

In my culture, girls have to be white. Like, your skin needs to be white to be pretty. But after I went to England and I travelled to Spain, many people there didn't think so. They would be like, "No, if you get tanned a little bit, you'll look really pretty too. And if you are black, you are also pretty." There are different kinds of pretty, not necessarily just being pale white and being super skinny. Now I feel like I am more ready to talk to people from different places and not to assume anything. I feel like I am more open minded.

**Mary** admitted that she "grew up in a bubble where most people were like" her. She further explained, "I had never not been represented in the classroom. Meaning that I had all white US women teachers." However, her worldview was transformed when she went to college.

**Mary** continued:

It wasn't until I went to college that I started to get a minor in leadership studies; it wasn't even my education minor, it was my leadership minor. They had a mention around being knowledgeable, ethical, caring and inclusive for a global world. So, I started to understand even myself more. And I don't think until college I'd really ever truly been introspective or reflective about how my culture has impacted the way that I exist or teach and interact with people. So, I think that college experience was my first shift when I finally started to recognize my own culture because like most white people it was just like regular; it is just what it is.

### ***Present motivators***

In addition to past events, present events also motivate people toward agency. All the participants pointed out that working with a diverse group of students motivates them to implement culturally relevant and responsive strategies in the classroom.

Andrew stated that “being married to someone who is not from the United States is a big part” of why he is empathetic toward his students. **Andrew** enjoys working with a diverse population and also views his role as that of being their advocate. He argued, “I fight hard as an advocate for English learner kids.”

Lucy, on the other hand, attributes her motivation to the relationships she has with her students as well as the satisfaction she gets from working with them. **Lucy** explained her views as follows:

My job is very rewarding in the way I can see my students improve fast ... And my students are very respectful. And once you build that relationship, they treat you with the utmost respect. They are just sweet sweet kiddos who have suffered so much in their lives but they come to school.

In addition to professional training that has influenced her motivations and worldviews, Mary is also motivated by the students she works with on a daily basis. **Mary** stated:

I took a class this last summer. It was a class for teachers and we did a lot about how our experiences as teachers are as students, and how our education and our lives impact our classroom practice. That was huge for me to be able to have the space and the community do that writing and reflection together because I started to realize, for one, I had never not been represented in the classroom. .... especially being in the classroom that I am in where it is not atypical to have 12 different countries represented; students who speak 10, 12 different languages because some students speak two or three. I think being in that environment. This is the only teaching that I have had since I started in this classroom setting, and I am in this classroom setting, so that has had a huge shift because for me, I have no choice but to examine how to do this.



### ***Future Aspiration Motivators***

Future aspirations also influence teacher agency. When asked if their future aspirations motivate their current teaching practices, both Andrew and Mary said that continuing to have a positive impact on the students is their greatest motivator. As for Lucy, she hopes that by working with her students, she will attain a more “comprehensive understanding of how language develops” because she hopes to one day work as a professor in an institution of higher learning.

### **Summary of Findings**

The first research question sought to investigate participants’ understanding of culturally relevant and responsive instructional practices as well as how those understandings were developed. The findings indicate that even though the training provided by the school district was inadequate, nevertheless, the participants took initiative themselves to learn more about the concept. Some of the means they employed include watching documentaries, studying under experts in the field, drawing from their teaching and lived experiences, and their interactions with students from diverse backgrounds.

On the question seeking to investigate how teachers implemented the various tenets of culturally relevant education, the findings indicate that the participants were intentional in creating spaces and opportunities for students to draw on their native languages and lived experiences to activate schema, predict learning content, process new information, create a sense of belonging, and build bridges between the known and the unknown (from instruction to classroom expectations). In addition, teachers facilitated students’ collaboration with each other, the sharing of their cultures with one another, and their participation in the sociopolitical process in order to disrupt the status quo and improve both their lives and those of their communities.

The third question related to teacher agency and sought to examine the past, present and future motivations of the participants that propel them toward infusing culture in their teaching practices since, in spite of the professional development training offered by the school district, implementation of culturally responsive and relevant practices in the classroom was neither closely monitored nor evaluated. Therefore, it was left to the teachers to voluntarily implement the practices. Based on the study's findings, the motivating factors included effective professional training, future professional aspirations, empathy, and daily interactions with students.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Schools in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse. In fact, there are about 5 million English learners in the United States, the majority of whom, about 71 percent, were born in the United States (Sugarman, 2018). Generally, most English learners are Spanish-speaking, but speakers of other languages are also becoming prevalent (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). The Migration Policy Institute estimates that almost one third of children under the age of eight entering schools in the United States have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English, and many parents “have varied countries of origin, races and ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses” (Park et al., 2018). Consequently, parents are more likely to socialize their children in the cultures and languages of their countries of origin long before the children join formal education.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate to what extent, if at all, teachers at a Midwest urban high school in the United States utilize students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the classroom. More specifically, this qualitative multi-case study examined the understandings, practices, and motivations of culturally relevant and responsive teachers. The guiding research questions were as follows: What is the teachers’ understanding of culturally relevant education? How do the teachers incorporate culturally relevant education in standards-based instructional practices in their classrooms? What motivates teachers to engage in culturally relevant education?

Because it was a qualitative study, meaning that it was about studying people’s experiences, their understanding of those experiences, the meanings they attach to those experiences, and how they make sense of the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the study examined the lived experiences of three teachers who were purposefully sampled. These teachers

mainly work with English learners from very diverse backgrounds. The students come from countries such as Nepal, Burma, Argentina, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, Honduras, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, Ukraine and others. The study was conducted over a span of a semester, and the researcher collected data using interviews, classroom observations, and field notes. Data analysis involved within case analysis as well as across case analysis in order to establish relationships within the data.

### **Thematic Discussion of Findings**

#### **Training and Understanding of Culturally Relevant Education**

Teachers in this study had participated in a culturally relevant and responsive professional development training that the school district had offered two years prior to this study. Even though one of the participants (Lucy) could not recall the training, the responses of the other two participants, Andrew and Mary, may shed light on why the training was considered to be both inadequate and ineffective. Whereas Andrew thought that the training was not comprehensive enough and did not adequately address issues of diversity unique to the school district, Mary, on the other hand, thought that the district should have been more singular in its training focus in order to make culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices more prominent. However, that was not the case, and this had an effect on the low impact the training had on the participants. This finding is consistent with previous research that has documented how teachers are not provided with the adequate and focused training and support they require to be equipped to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students (Myers, 2017; Piazza et al., 2015).

Since the school district's training did not adequately meet the needs of the teachers, teachers demonstrated agency, took initiative, and engaged in various methods of learning. These

methods included engaging in extensive research about the students' countries of origin, drawing on years of experience garnered from working with students from various cultures, practicing cultural-awareness, paying attention to detail in order to know students' individual needs, appreciating the equality of all cultures, enrolling for professional training by experts, joining online education communities, and collaborating with colleagues. All these teacher-led initiatives require teachers to conduct their own needs analysis to not only determine any gaps they may have in their teaching practices, but to also devise methods to address them.

On the one hand, this study suggests that even in the absence of formal training in cultural relevance and responsiveness in the classroom, teachers have other ways of learning as discussed above. All the methods mentioned above serve to leverage students' cultural and linguistic knowledge in the classroom and to enhance their learning experiences. On the other hand, this finding is consistent with some of the recommendations for practice that call for teachers to engage in collaborative practices with each other and participate in professional training on effective practices for teaching diverse learners (Bonner et al., 2018).

### **Use of Cultural Knowledge, Familiar Tasks, and Native Languages**

This study's findings suggest that utilizing students' cultural knowledge and having them engage in culturally familiar tasks greatly enhances students' reading experiences and academic engagement. Such tasks for students include discussing and freewriting about their cultural practices, using informatics and artifacts to showcase their cultural heritage, and using cultural and lived experiences as valid evidence to substantiate claims. In addition, use of cultural knowledge assists students in activating prior knowledge, which helps them to anticipate, situate and process new information or concepts. This finding aligns with other studies that found that when students engage in culturally familiar tasks, they become more engaged and they are able

to connect what they know with what they need to know (Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011; Kelley et al., 2015).

The participants also found that use of cultural referents in English language arts helps students predict content and relate events in a story to events in their lives as they build connections with various themes. Also, cultural referents enable students to evaluate outcomes in story using their culture as the point of reference, which in turn allows them to tell their own stories, thus affirming their cultural experiences. The affirmation can not only lead to an increased sense of pride in their culture, but it can also enhance students' motivation and engagement with learning. In addition, use of cultural referents during learning can help students engage in critical analysis of literary elements in a story, especially when they utilize their cultural lenses and lived experiences to both interpret and critically analyze literature.

The use of native languages in the classroom validates and affirms students' identities and languages. This study's findings indicate that all the participants were in support of translanguaging for English learners, especially learners who were still in the beginning stages of English language development. The findings illustrate that English learners translanguaged when learning and reviewing new vocabulary, when they worked on projects with their peers, when they communicated with a teacher who spoke their native language, when they consulted peers in an effort to understand new concepts and assignments, and when translating texts online. This finding aligns with previous studies which show that students use their native language to make meaning of new content, to communicate with their peers or the teacher, to learn new vocabulary and to decode reading assignments (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018; Pacheco & Miller, 2016; Symons & Ponzio, 2019)

However, one of the participants was of the view that students with higher English language proficiency skills should refrain from relying on their native language to decode reading texts. He suggested that, instead of students translating reading texts into their native languages in order to comprehend them, they should be equipped with the tools necessary to succeed. These tools included learning how to apply context clues, explicit instruction of the equivalent of sight words such as those taught to students in the lower grades, general reading strategies, and problem-solving skills. Even though the participant's views do not go far enough to claim that the use of the native language interferes with the learning of a new language as others have, nonetheless, they do join other voices that are critical of native language use in the classroom (Mellom et al., 2018).

### **Teaching Materials, Critical Inquiry and Classroom Environment**

Teaching materials and critical literacy are an important part of culturally relevant education. This study's findings indicated that several factors guided the selection of instructional resources for whole class instruction. Some of the factors included student choice, accessibility and comprehensibility of a text, and the ability of students to relate to and connect with a text through universal themes that they can interpret through their own cultural lenses. This finding is consistent with studies that advocate for inclusive texts (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Kesler, 2011), texts and resources that create opportunities for students to connect to (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019), identify with (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018), and relate to (Chen & Yang, 2017; Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011; Sharma & Christ, 2017).

It is noteworthy that this study took the discussion a step further by demonstrating that when making decisions about instructional materials, the comprehensibility and accessibility of a text superseded specific cultural content. Perhaps teachers adopted this approach because their

focus was more on shared universal themes than specific cultural content, especially because they had multiple and diverse cultures represented in any given class. Consequently, selecting materials purely on the basis of cultural content would more likely than not favor one culture over another. To avoid this likelihood, teachers chose to focus more on shared cultural traits and universal themes related to human behavior.

Critical inquiry is a practice that involves investigating a topic in order to gain new understanding about it. All the participants engaged their students in critical inquiry either at the beginning of a unit of study to establish relevance of the topic, at the end of a unit to extend and deepen learning, or in the course of a unit as an integral part of the learning process. As part of the inquiry process, the students craft questions, conduct research, write reports, and share their learning with others. In the process, students explore their interests, which can lead to more engagement and motivation in their learning. This finding is consistent with other studies that extol similar benefits students enjoy when teachers incorporate critical inquiry in their learning (Piazza et al., 2015; Sharma & Christ, 2017).

This study is consistent with other studies that emphasized the importance of setting clear classroom expectations (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019). Even though the participants acknowledged the importance of setting classroom expectations early on in the school year, they went about the process differently. Two of the participants created the expectations and then explained them to their students. The other participant co-created her classroom expectations together with the students, which resulted in a contract that they all signed. In spite of how the teachers went about creating the expectations, they all were in agreement about the importance of having equitable classroom expectations that were not necessarily determined by the individual cultures represented in the classroom. In other words, classroom management should



not be differentiated according to the cultures of the students in the class because different cultures have different norms about rules, compliance, and consequences following non-compliance. Hence, it might be difficult to successfully implement those different norms in one setting. Instead, the teacher and the students should create a classroom culture that informs class norms and those norms should be communicated clearly to the students.

Based on the findings of this study, even when teachers have clear expectations for all students, there are instances when teachers might need to accommodate students' expectations for conduct in a class setting, especially if those expectations are incongruent with established norms. When making those accommodations, it is important for teachers to keep in mind that there is a fine line between respecting and honoring students' backgrounds and establishing a classroom environment that fosters learning for all students and peaceful cohabitation with each other.

In instances where students' behavior that is either influenced by their culture or their personality is incongruent with the established classroom norms, teachers can redirect the students by first validating and affirming their practices before building bridges toward the expected behavior in the classroom. This finding aligns with Hollie's (2018) vabbing concept that asks teachers to validate and affirm students' cultures as they build and bridge students' knowledge of the new culture.

As other studies have shown, culturally responsive and relevant educators create a classroom environment that is inviting and nurturing (Chen & Yang, 2017; Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019; Fink, 2017; Gay, 2010; Hollie, 2018; Villegas et al. 2017). To create a sense of belonging for the students, the teachers hang students' family pictures, pictures of their countries of origin as well as miniature flags of those countries, artifacts of some significance to the

students, and completed assignments on the walls. These objects not only decorate the classroom, but they also create opportunities for students to showcase their expertise and their backgrounds.

### **Cultural Competence and Caring**

In addition to creating a conducive classroom environment, helping students build, maintain, and share cultural competence is one of the features of culturally relevant and responsive teaching. All the teachers who participated in this study agreed that students should be provided opportunities to investigate their cultures in order to build cultural competence and to share their knowledge with other people. Some of the strategies teachers engage students in to build cultural competence include asking students to retell folktales or traditional narratives orally or in writing, to design infographics using photographs and artifacts about themselves and their families that they consider to be significant and write about them before displaying them for others to see, and to revisit memories and experiences about places, foods or even beliefs and sharing those reflections with classmates, teachers, and even students at other high schools using technology.

All these activities affirm students' backgrounds and cultures and create spaces for students to share what matters to them with others. When aligned with the curriculum, these types of projects assume the role of enhancing both cultural and academic competence because students get to practice academic concepts using culture as a resource. In addition, when students build their cultural competence and share the same with others, they are likely to sustain a sense of pride, validation and affirmation of their cultures. This finding aligns with other studies that have stressed the importance of building and maintaining students' cultural

competence (Dutro et al., 2011; Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Villegas et al., 2017).

Caring is an integral part of culturally relevant education. Teachers demonstrate that they care about their students by getting to know about them, their families, their lived experiences, their cultures, and their countries of origin. One strategy teachers can use to get to know their students is to ask them to bring in photographs or family heirlooms and write about those items, explaining why they are meaningful to them. This finding aligns with previous studies that discuss the importance of personal artifacts and photographs in getting to know students (Laman & Henderson, 2019).

Another strategy for getting to know students is to ask them to engage in freewrites. During freewrites, depending on the teacher's instructions, students can write about whatever they want or they can connect their writing to what they are learning in class. When students are given an opportunity to write about their lives, they reveal a lot about themselves. This finding aligns with other studies suggesting that student writing is one of the strategies teachers use to get to know their students (Bomer, 2017).

As demonstrated in this study, another strategy that teachers can use is to ask students to write about memorable places, foods, and traditions and explain why they are meaningful to the student. These activities allow the students to express pride in their cultural and personal heritages. In addition, when students' experiences are included in curricular activities, it affirms to the students the importance of their cultures and is likely to cause them to sustain a sense of pride and value in their experiences, especially when those experiences are not considered the norm by the dominant group in society. This is consistent with previous studies that indicate that the use of personal artifacts and personal stories provides glimpses into student lives at home and

creates openings for conversations that enhance relationship building between the teacher and the student (Chen & Yang, 2017; Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2016; Ghiso et al., 2019).

Teachers sometimes demonstrate to their students that they care when they empathize with them and demonstrate a willingness to help. Even when teachers have not shared the same experiences as the students, they can still demonstrate understanding and where possible, especially when students have undergone traumatic experiences, they can facilitate access to socioemotional services and advocate for their students. Such caring practices can greatly benefit refugee immigrant students who have fled war and other atrocities as well as other students undergoing various personal challenges that can interfere with their learning.

However, students need to feel safe enough with an adult for them to openly share what is going on in their lives. Therefore, it is important that teachers create the safe havens students need for them to feel loved, seen, and valued. This can be achieved through qualitative surveys that investigate how students feel about the class as well as their relationships with their teachers and their peers, conversations with students, and provision of a safe non-judgmental environment that encourages students to express their thoughts candidly. When these measures are put in place, students are more likely to start caring more about their academic performance because they know that the teacher cares and has their best interests at heart.

### ***Community Connections and Sociopolitical Consciousness***

Study participants acknowledged the importance of building connections with the community within and without the school. Whereas two of the participants focused on building community within the school between students, the other participant included connections with the community outside of school. Building within school connections, especially with the immigrant English learner community, entailed pairing together students who spoke the same

native language such that a student with a higher English language proficiency was paired with a student with lower English language proficiency. The students were provided with an opportunity to work together and create what Prier (2012) refers to as a community of learners. A possible outcome from this collaboration is that the more advanced language learners inspired and motivated the beginner language learners once they saw the language learning gains made by the more advanced language students who at one time had been in their shoes. Using this strategy can increase student motivation, inspiration, confidence, and academic achievement, not just in language learning, but also across other subject areas as students transfer their skills and motivations.

Consistent with studies that show the need for strong school and community relations (Au, 1998), teachers in this study sought to foster school-community partnerships by bringing in subject matter experts to speak to the students about a topic the students were learning in class, connecting students and their families to resources in the community such as food banks where students also volunteered their services, and providing students with opportunities to translate for their parents and other parents in the community during parent-teacher conferences. All these strategies serve to enhance school-community relations.

This study is consistent with other studies that advocate for the disruption of the status quo for the benefit of the students, their communities and the society at large (Alim & Paris, 2017; Au, 2005; Bucholtz et al., 2017; Gay, 2010; Hollie, 2018; Kinloch, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Villegas et al., 2017). However, this study demonstrates that social change does not have to occur on a grand scale. Rather, students and teachers can effect change gradually in the manner that is most accessible and meaningful for them and their communities, even though the actions influence a small number of people.

One of the ways in which the culturally relevant and responsive teachers disrupt the status quo is by teaching English to non-native speakers of English so that they can function successfully in the new country while still maintaining proficiency in their native languages. Inability to speak English greatly disadvantages English learners because it denies them access to the language of instruction at school and the language of commerce in the society. Such lack of access inhibits the students from full and active participation in school and in the society, thereby ensuring that they remain marginalized from the mainstream society. Teaching students English provides them with the language skills they need to succeed both at school and in the society. In addition, when students learn the language, they are taking initiative to change their circumstances for the betterment of themselves, their families, and consequently, their communities.

In addition, the students work to ensure that their communities are not alienated due to language barriers. If not addressed, language barriers can lead to exclusion from participation in the mainstream society and serve to maintain a status quo of economic and social inequality. Further, without translation and interpretation from the native language to the English language and vice versa, it is difficult for students and their families to access crucial services and resources. To help alleviate such an eventuality, students offer language translation and interpreter services whenever and wherever necessary, including creating an informational brochure. Times when translation services are required include visits to the doctor and to community events, parent-teacher conferences across the school district that serve to include parents in the conversation about school and decision-making processes, and during after school tutoring and activities aimed at facilitating academic success for their peers by assisting them with school assignments and projects. Therefore, learning to speak English and engaging in

language translation and interpreter services are not just about helping the individual student, but they are also about enriching communities and overcoming socioeconomic obstacles.

Another strategy the teachers use that effects change and makes a difference in the lives of the students and the community is teaching students how to connect with and succeed within the wider American society they live in. This is achieved by teaching students how to order food in a restaurant, how to answer the phone appropriately, how to pay their bills, and how to function in an environment that is different from what they previously had been used to.

Another way in which students are change agents who participate in activities that better their communities includes taking measures to alleviate hunger. Many of the immigrant students come from lower income families where the threat of hunger looms large. Therefore, taking part in measures that help alleviate the problem, such as volunteering to distribute food, is a meaningful strategy for effecting social change and supporting the community.

### **Critical Reflection**

This study supports other studies that suggest that teachers should provide students with opportunities for cross-cultural competence as they reflect on their own cultures when juxtaposed with other cultures (Chen & Young, 2017; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Yuan & Jiang, 2019). The teachers who participated in this study provide their students with opportunities to engage in a critical reflection about their own cultures. In the process, students learn about cultural equity, cross-cultural competence, and the importance of appreciating other people's cultural experiences that might differ from their own. For example, in an English language arts class, instead of lecturing students about their own cultural insensitivities, the objective of addressing the insensitivities can be achieved through literature. Because most literary texts serve to illuminate human behavior and human behavior is more similar than it is different, teachers can

guide the students into using the events in a story as well as the actions of the characters as a mirror that students can use to reflect on their own beliefs and actions as they pertain to other people. One of the teachers found this practice to be effective in creating space for dialogue and open discussion about cultural issues and biases.

When students become aware of their practices and how they might impact their fellow students, then they are more likely to engage in situational appropriateness. As Hollie (2018) states, when students are situationally appropriate, they exercise cultural dexterity and competence so that they know how to act appropriately in any given situation while remaining true to their own beliefs.

### **Standards-based Instruction**

This study also demonstrates that culturally responsive and relevant instructional practices can be implemented in settings where state-mandated standards-based education is the practice. The participating teachers stated that the requirement to use state-mandated learning standards to guide instruction for students did not in any way impede their practices because of the broad nature of the standards. As also asserted by Valencia & Wixson (2013), the state standards that govern student learning provide teachers with a lot of leeway in how they choose to execute them. The teachers found the standards not to be prescriptive, specifically when referring to how they go about text selection and writing assignments. Hence, teachers can be guided by the learning needs of their students when making decisions on how to implement the standards. This finding aligns with other studies that advise teachers to creatively provide opportunities for students to use their cultural knowledge when meeting the learning standards (Camangian, 2015; Sleeter & Carmona, 2017).

### ***Teacher Agency***



In an environment where the implementation of culturally relevant education is not actively monitored, it takes teacher agency to consistently practice its tenets. This study is consistent with other studies suggesting that the present practice of teacher agency is motivated by the past practices and experiences as well as the future aspirations of the teacher (Biesta et al., 2015). Participants in this study could identify past events that served to motivate them to practice culturally relevant education. These past events include living in a foreign country and learning how other people live, enrolling in professional training to get a deeper understanding of culturally relevant education, taking college classes that require students to critically reflect on their cultural experiences and possible privileges, being married to someone from a different culture, travelling to different parts of the world, and having a broad and inclusive worldview.

In addition to past experiences, future aspirations of the teachers in this study also play a role in motivating them to practice culturally relevant education. Some of the future aspirations they mentioned include the desire to improve their teaching craft, the desire to have a lasting positive impact on their students, and a desire to learn more about an area of interest for purposes of a career in higher education.

In addition to past experiences and future aspirations, as Ostorga (2018) states, teachers' decisions, motivations, and actions are also influenced by who they are and the situations they find themselves in. The teachers in this study stated that their ongoing interactions with students, the positive impact they are having on students' lives, and the relationships they have developed with students from multiple and diverse backgrounds motivate them to continue to embrace culturally relevant educational practices.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One of this study's limitations is the sample size. The sample size consisted of three participants who were purposefully selected for the purpose of providing an in-depth investigation into their culturally relevant education practices. Because of the limited and small size of the sample, the study is not suitable for generalization. To address this limitation for purposes of generalization, the study can be replicated with a much bigger randomly selected sample size in similar settings as those in this study. The sample size should be large and varied enough to warrant generalization of findings.

Another limitation for the study is that data was collected only from English language arts teachers who teach English language learners in an urban school setting. It is possible that the subject the teachers taught, the school demographics, and the school's setting heavily influenced the findings of the study. Replicating this study among teachers who teach other content subjects to English learners in a different school setting would address this limitation.

The validity of a data collection instrument refers to its accuracy in doing what it was intended to do when all other causal relationships have been eliminated (O'Leary & Hunt, 2016). A possible limitation of this study is that the same data collection instrument was used for all participants. Specifically, during interviews, the participants were asked the same questions even though the participants had very different backgrounds and experiences. It is possible that their worldviews influenced their responses whether intentionally or unintentionally. To mitigate this eventuality, the semi-structured interview questions were accompanied by follow up questions that addressed issues of possible bias and explored multiple interpretations of an issue.

## **Implications for Practice**

The implications for practice arising from this study address the areas of training for in-service teachers, standards-based planning and implementation of lessons, selection of materials for English language arts courses, setting classroom expectations, and advocating for social change. In-service teachers of culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students should be provided with in-depth and focused training on how to be culturally relevant and responsive in their classrooms. The training should be targeted and adapted to meet the needs of individual diverse school populations. The training should include ways in which teachers can validate and affirm their students' cultural backgrounds and experiences and suggest ways in which teachers can help students build bridges between what they know and what they need to know in order to be successful in academic settings. In situations where formal training is not possible, teachers already working with students from diverse and multiple cultural and linguistic backgrounds can draw on best practices from themselves and their colleagues, knowledge garnered from their students, observations of student practices in and out of the classroom, and reflection on one's own teaching practices.

In addition, colleges and universities should adequately prepare student teachers to design and implement lessons that utilize the cultural and linguistic knowledge of their students. Such preparation should include hands-on teaching experience in urban school settings where one is most likely to find culturally and linguistically diverse students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Where hands-on teaching experience in an urban setting is not feasible, college instructors can incorporate, in their taught curriculum, documented reflections of student teachers who have had first-hand experience teaching in an urban school. The reflections would

provide insight into some of the culturally relevant and responsive strategies teachers on the ground are utilizing to teach students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Many schools have to use state-mandated learning standards to guide their planning and execution of instruction. In such settings, the standards themselves are non-prescriptive and broad enough to accommodate teacher and student choice with regard to reading and writing materials and assignments. Teachers can take advantage of the non-prescriptive nature of the standards to include material resources that students can connect with and design writing assignments that would encourage students to draw from their rich repertoires of cultural and linguistic experiences.

Another implication for practice relates to curriculum for English language arts, whether in English learner classes or regular English language arts classes. During the selection of reading resources in English language arts courses, in addition to student interest, teachers sometimes want to include texts that contain cultural content. In culturally and linguistically diverse classes, it becomes difficult for teachers, whose time is already over-stretched, to accommodate all the students' wishes. In such cases, the teachers should be guided by comprehensibility, accessibility, and relatability of a text. The text should be one with universal themes that students can connect with and interpret through their own individual cultural lenses.

Regarding classroom management, teachers should not only implement equitable classroom expectations, but they should also help students whose behaviors and expectations are incongruent with established classroom norms to understand the expectations in order to have a conducive learning environment for all learners. As stated by Hollie (2018), helping such students would entail first validating and affirming their beliefs about how to behave in a class

setting before helping them to build knowledge about the expectations they need to meet in their current setting and finally, bridging what they know to do with what they need to do.

The final implication for practice relates to the measures both teachers and immigrant students can take to impact their communities, bring about social change, and decrease marginalization. When teachers teach the English language to their immigrant students so that the students can access resources and services in their communities that they otherwise would not be able to access because of language barriers, then the teachers are preparing their students to be change agents within their communities. When immigrant students take their learning and apply it in their community by volunteering in community organizations and offering translation and interpreter services, then they are enriching their communities and providing their families with a voice and access to resources that they otherwise would not have access to. All these activities work to elevate the lives of the students, their families, and their communities.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This qualitative multi-case study focused on the practices of English language arts teachers working with English learners in an urban public school. The first recommendation for further research entails a replication of the study in a suburban or rural setting to examine how the research findings in one setting contrasts or compares to findings in another setting.

Further research could also include the culturally relevant education practices of teachers of other disciplines besides English language arts in order to determine if there are elements in the current study's findings that are unique to English language arts. It would be important to find out what kinds of findings would be generated by further research that focuses on teachers teaching subjects such as history, social studies, the sciences and even math.

Additionally, further research can also examine the practices of teachers who serve multiple diverse classrooms of students that are not English learners. It would be interesting to discover if the studies will compare or contract when the student population of the study is slightly altered.

Since many previous studies have focused on the perceptions of teachers and their implementation of culturally relevant education, further studies could focus on the impact those practices have on students. Such research could include interviews with students, examination of student work, focus group discussions, and any other suitable data collection methods. It would be important to investigate if the teachers' culturally relevant educational practices were achieving the desired effect among the students.

### **Conclusions**

As schools in the United States continue to become more diverse with students from all over the world and the teaching workforce continues to be dominated by teachers who do not share the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as worldviews as the students, it is imperative that schools find ways to adopt asset-based strategies aimed at leveraging the students' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge in order to enrich their educational experiences.

Even in settings where standards-based learning is the expectation due to state educational requirements, as the participants in this study have demonstrated, it is still possible for teachers to exercise agency and incorporate the students' cultural and linguistic repertoire of knowledge in instructional practices for the purposes of inspiring, motivating, and enhancing student learning.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. How did the district training on culturally responsive teaching (2-3 years ago) inform your understanding of the concept?
2. How else have you developed your understanding of culturally responsive teaching?
3. Are there other ways your understanding of culturally responsive teaching has developed beyond the district training?
4. What do you perceive to be your successes with the incorporation of culturally responsive instructional practices?
5. What do you perceive to be the challenges with incorporating of culturally responsive instructional practices?
6. Does the diversity of students in your classroom influence the texts you choose for your students or the lesson activities you plan for them?
7. Does the diversity of students in your classroom influence how you implement classroom behavior management?
8. Does the expectation to teach the standards have any effect on the incorporation of culturally responsive instructional strategies in your classroom?
9. How do you use students' cultural knowledge during instruction to help them connect to new academic concepts?
10. How do you provide opportunities for students to explore their own cultural knowledge in order to build their own cultural competence?
11. How do you provide opportunities for student in your classroom to share their cultures with each other?
12. How do you provide opportunities for students to critically reflect on their own lives and cultures?
13. How do you provide your students with opportunities to engage in issues of social justice relating to the school, the community, or their own lives?
14. How do you connect your instruction to what is happening in the community?
15. What experiences in your life (lived and anticipated) have prepared you to include culturally responsive instructional practices in your craft of teaching?
16. What in your personal life (environment, current social roles, interactions, perspectives, or any other factor) influences/impacts your implementation of culturally responsive instructional practices?

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

To the prospective participant:

**STUDY:** Culturally Responsive Teaching in Practice: Exploring English Language Arts Classrooms that Serve Ethnically, Linguistically, and Culturally Diverse Students

#### INTRODUCTION

The Department of Curriculum and Teaching at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to examine the ways in which English language arts teachers are incorporating culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices in their instruction of English language learners (ELL) from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds.

#### PROCEDURES

For this study, you will be asked to allow the researcher into your classroom to observe your teaching practice. You will also be asked to share lesson plans relating to the lesson being observed as well as student work relating to the lesson. In addition, you will be asked to participate in a follow up interview at a time of your convenience and at a place of your choosing. You can also expect follow up questions for clarification either in person or by email. For purposes of transcription and member checks, I will record the interviews. At any time during the recording, you can ask me to stop. I will transcribe the interviews, and I will be the only one to handle all the data. I will erase all the recordings after I am done with the study, may be in a couple of years.

#### RISKS and BENEFITS

I do not anticipate any risks save for the amount of your time that I am asking for to conduct the interview. This research will highlight the ways in which teachers, who teach some of the most linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms at the school, find ways to incorporate CRT in their instructional practice.

#### PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

There will be no payments for participation in the study. Participation is purely voluntary.

#### PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher(s) will use a study number or a pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission.



Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

#### REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

#### CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Jane Rosenow at jane\_rosenow@ku.edu

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.

#### PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email irb@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Type/Print Participant's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

*Researcher Contact Information*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Faculty Supervisor*

\_\_\_\_\_

