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How Might I Increase And Maintain Student Engagement Through Culturally Responsive Practices

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HOW MIGHT I INCREASE AND MAINTAIN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE
USE OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

I began working in the education system 11 years ago by chance. It has been a gift bestowed upon me because I absolutely love teaching children. I had no experience with the public school system, as my siblings and I attended private school. In my experience, a little over a decade ago, school culture and classroom culture were different from what they are now. Classrooms were aligned with desks in rows, walls were decorated with anchor charts and pictures of students not representative of the student population, and there was only one straightforward way of teaching students. Teachers were not considering that the education system and school culture were still following the “assembly line” structure upon which it was designed.

Ten years ago, I viewed students as individuals who needed to be taught how to think and what to think. I experienced them not being allowed to engage in their own thoughts or explorative instincts. The diverse populations of these classrooms were not only completely disengaged from learning, but also grossly underrepresented in the content they were taught and around their classrooms. From the time of my starting a career in education to now, student populations have gradually moved from a majority of Caucasian students to more students of color Black, Latino, and Asian students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (Tileston & Darling, 2008, p. 14). I will take this observation a step further by adding that the student body changed even more to having many Somali students, which means religion and cultural

appropriations have become more important. As I spend more time in the education system and realize the dynamics of this complex system, I wonder *How might I increase and maintain student engagement through the use of culturally responsive practices?*

Addressing the question

There are many elements to take into consideration when thinking about Culturally Responsive Teaching and no exact way of providing instruction.. My first experience with cultural diversity in the classroom was a two day training provided by my current school district. We were all given a book as a resource to help us open the door to having “courageous conversations” (Singleton, 2006) about race with each other. Since this was something that appeared to be new and revolutionary as classrooms were becoming more diverse, I felt as though everyone was willing to acknowledge there was an issue with race in our school and we as a staff would begin to address it. In doing so, we needed to unlearn some of the many politically correct social norms - like being “color blind” to those around us.

In order to make a significant difference when implementing culturally responsive teaching, the entire school culture must be transformed. Educators would need to be open to changing their mindset to effectively and efficiently approach teaching students of diverse backgrounds. With this, there may be a positive difference in student engagement. How individuals perceive the world is innately unique and we all want to feel a sense of belonging. In my own educational experience, it was very difficult to be a Black girl in a Catholic school located in New Orleans, Louisiana. There would have been a definite difference in my classroom engagement if I thought my teachers actually cared about my learning. I had so many

hurdles that were not related to school to overcome and I was constantly proving I was just as deserving of my education as my White classmates. Not a day went by in my entire time of being in school where I wondered if I was being treated equitably. And to question many of the ways subjects were taught and how content was provided was not an option. This is why I realize the traditional way of teaching students should become obsolete and school cultures need to transform into something with more to offer all students, such as classrooms with more student voice and choice. Here is where my interest in the question lies. If my teachers taught me in a way I felt culturally included, would I have been more engaged? And would the consideration of culturally responsive teaching have kept me fully engaged? For my research purposes, this is what I desire to discover is true for other students.

Rationale

While transforming the school culture may be necessary for engagement, inclusion is equally important. I argue that student success occurs when teachers use culturally responsive methods with full inclusion of all students. This can be incredibly difficult especially when classroom sizes vary along with the needs of the students in any given year; however, building authentic connections with students makes them feel welcomed and allows them to flourish. In turn, they are more likely to participate and advocate their needs. It is also been my experience that inclusion is not just about racial representation. Inclusion is about all different types of learners such as English Language Learners (EL's), those that fall under Americans with Disabilities or 504 Act (ADA) and Special Education which may include Other Health category (OHD) - Learning Disabled (LD), Developmentally Delayed (DD), Emotional Behavioral

Disorder (EBD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (hyperactivity or inattentive), Physical Impairments (PI)-etc, students with socioeconomic challenges, as well as students identified as Gifted and Talented (GT). Each of students have a right by law to be in a classroom where they can see themselves, add value, have differentiated learning, and be academically successful.

Naturally, it makes sense to connect achievement to Culturally Responsive Teaching practices because as students feel included and trust the system outside of their homes, they will began to succeed in the classroom. Small achievements can lead to better self esteem and self efficacy, which boosts the desire to want to learn more.

My student teaching was done in a suburban public school. This influenced my question because many of the students were affluent, well-rounded, articulate and somewhat engaged in their learning already. They used outside influences to help them with their writing; they were eager to work in small groups and eager to participate in whole group lessons; they wanted to function as a community; and their families were fully invested in their school. The school culture a made sure they were inclusive to all students and that their students were successful at all intervals of learning. If there was any question about achievement, they searched for resources that might help. Many of these resources were related to making a cultural connection that may have been missed earlier in the year. In turn, the students knew they were cared for and they worked harder because of it. I witnessed them achieving their goals and helping each other achieve their goals. Even the quietest students were willing to participate in their learning.

Lastly, I think it is important to mention full active engagement. It is not enough for just students to be engaged in their education. For culturally responsive teaching to be effective, we

need parent, staff and community involvement. The challenge here is investing enough planning and instructional time in the classroom and getting students excited enough about learning to increase parent participation and involvement. The challenge is also, getting the outside community and school community to be there for the students.

As I mentioned before, my student teaching experience really led me along the path to student engagement. Bringing the outside world into the classroom makes students want to share with each other and using culturally responsive practices will encourage them to write about their stories or apply what they learn at school into their communities. This also increases oral language for those with a language barrier. Sharing experiences through learning and facilitating that environment, leads to engagement. The teacher I co-taught with for student teaching invited the Somali liaison into her classroom to talk about the Somali culture. This invoked so much pride from the Somali students in the class. After he left, the Somali students were able to continue sharing about their home traditions. Schools also need to create events or classroom opportunities for families and community members to share. This adds on to inclusion and provides students with a chance to understand what the world is like - especially those who fall under the socioeconomic category.

Summary

In conclusion, I feel very passionate about getting students more engaged in their learning along with educators, parents and community members. It is not taken for granted that this is a difficult task to research. Culturally Responsive Teaching methods revolve around many different factors that can impact the lives of children. Since I have seen some of these

things implemented on a small scale, there is plenty of literature and resources available to give my project some merit.

For the remainder of this project, I will continue to connect my research themes to the question, *How might I increase and maintain student engagement through the use of culturally responsive practices?* The themes focused in this capstone are transformation, inclusion, achievement, and engagement. Each of the chapters to follow will discuss each theme individually in relation to the question and unavoidably to each other. It is my experience teaching from two different types of schooling, urban public school children and student teaching suburban public school children that tells me this project could be progressive in classrooms.

CHAPTER TWO

The Research

Transforming the School Culture

Introduction

This section will focus on the educators working toward changing the school culture. Teachers cannot use Culturally Responsive Practices and be successful if they are not willing to transform their mindsets and unlearn some things they believe to be true about race. For school culture to become transformed, educators across the board must be willing to talk about race (Singleton, 2006, p. 229). Closing the racial achievement gap begins with refocusing schooling on the children's educational needs rather than on the personal needs of the adults who inhabit the buildings (Singleton, 2006, p. 228).

Color Blindness

As mentioned earlier in Chapter One, some social norms need to be unlearned. It is necessary to revisit the statement about being color blind. Many beliefs concerning race are based on misconceptions (Pollock, 2008, p. 21). It is a part of our culture that "everyone" is comfortable when race is talked about, but the fact of the matter is not all groups are made to feel comfortable as a result of their race. Many of us use the term color blind to see all people in the same way. Having this belief, especially as an educator, can be dangerous. "By professing [to] be color blind, educators essentially indicate that no cultural difference exist between White people and people of color [and this] color blindness can lead to further marginalization and often even stand in the way of [students] receiving critical resources, support, and advancement"

(Singleton, 2006, p. 95). Individuality is unique and that applies to diversity as well. Talking about race and acknowledging there is discomfort in discussing race could make people uncomfortable (Pollock 2008), however, educators cannot have equitable schools/classrooms/districts without a dialogue about it. Teachers are facilitators of the practices in their classrooms. If educators cannot acknowledge or refuse to realize there is a problem with race in the education system, then we can not expect them to use culturally responsive practices (Singleton, 2006). Without Culturally Responsive Practices, students of diverse populations experience limited inclusion in the classroom. Culturally Responsive Practices is about asking “What does race have to do with this (Singleton, 2006),” and making sure each student is receiving an equitable learning experience every day. For any of this to change or make a difference, educators need to have the willingness to change their mindsets.

Mindset

Muhammad (2009), author of *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division* wrote, “terms like research based and best practices have been no match for the deeply ingrained disbelief in student ability that cripples many struggling schools.” He goes further to say that he “[studied] several schools where pessimistic faculty members are eager to prove that new strategies or programs aimed at raising student performance do not work and that cultural change is a much more difficult form of change to accomplish” (Muhammad, 2009). This is a matter of mindset. A mindset has been defined as a set of attitudes each person has (Muhammad, 2015, p. 51). Educators have to be willing to transform their thinking if they want to be successful in using culturally responsive practices in the classroom and with a growth

mindset, students have the opportunity to become better achievers thus increasing their engagement. .

Senge, author of *Schools That Learn (2000)*, suggested that teachers need to be reflective in their teaching. Educators need to have a dynamic state of mind when building a community. They should always step back and view the classroom environment, since it is an environment they create from day one. Culturally responsive practices are not being used if the teacher does not consider the following questions:

- Who are the children experiencing difficulties?
- Are they disproportionately from poor families or ethnic minority backgrounds?
- Are ethnic, cultural, or learning style-oriented differences seen as deficits?
- What important skills and knowledge do [the students] have?
- How can instruction relate to the knowledge and skills [the students] bring to the classroom? (Senge, 2000, p. 277)

Culturally responsive practices are ingrained into some very complex and often controversial issues and it begins with having open conversations about race and the willingness to make a change in mindsets.

Summary

Both unlearning and a change in mindset are goals toward having higher achievement (which is part of engagement) and maintaining engagement no matter the challenge. Students have to trust their teachers if engagement is possible. Teachers also have to actually care about racial (and cultural) issues to incorporate culturally responsive practices into their classroom.

Teachers must be the ambassadors of equity in their classrooms. This does not mean enabling students because of their ethnicity and should not be confused with fairness. For example, fair means that everyone has shoes, but equity means having shoes that fit. As educators we must remember, our thoughts matter. Our thoughts transform our actions. How we think and what we think will have a tremendous impact on our activity as human beings and the quality of life that we enjoy (Muhammad, 2015, p. 51). This will be true for the young lives we impress ourselves upon.

Inclusion

Introduction

This section addresses the need for an inclusive classroom. Researched based methods will be outlined demonstrating how be a culturally responsive teacher and how to effectively incorporate culturally responsive practices into the classroom. There will be statistics showing the growth in the school climate, thus pushing for the necessity for inclusive classrooms, and explain how student cultures are important to consider when implementing culturally responsive practices. It will also unify the themes full circle to the question: *How might I increase and maintain student engagement through the use of culturally responsive practices?* by realizing that inclusionary practices lead to higher achievement and greater engagement.

What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Culturally responsive teaching is a framework that “. . . builds bridges between the culture of the school and the cultures of home and community . . .” (Tileston & Darling, 2008, p.

55). It is not just about race; therefore, when teachers think about diversity, they have to know diversity includes all diverse learners (Shalaway, 1998, p. 65). A culturally responsive teacher not only teaches students of multicultural backgrounds, but also children dealing with the effects of poverty, violence, family dysfunction, and adverse neighborhood conditions (Tileston, 2008, p. 56). These children are often students who live in inner-city areas where students may not be exposed to books, practical life experiences, nutritious foods, and may not provided the proper tools to self regulate their emotions. A culturally responsive teacher considers these things about the everyday lives of students, along with the other disabilities mentioned in the introduction.

So what does a culturally responsive teacher do? A culturally responsive teacher take[s] specific actions to reflect the cultural values and diversity of [their] students (Tileston, 2008, p. 56). *Why Culture Counts* (2008) outlines several effective characteristics of a culturally responsive teacher:

- Effective urban teachers are persistent and constantly pursue strategies and activities so that all children can be successful.
- They take responsibility for their students' learning, including the learning of students at risk.
- They relate theory to practice and translate innovative ideas into classroom practice.
- They develop rapport and cultivate personal relationships with their students.
- They are capable of adjusting to and coping with the demands of bureaucracy.
- They take responsibility for their own mistakes.
- They possess emotional and physical stamina, which allows them to endure the challenges and crises of urban settings.

- They have organizational and managerial skills.
- They understand that teacher success is achieved by effort and hard work, not just ability.
- They engage in active teaching, not just direct instruction.
- They are committed to meeting the individual differences of students, with no excuses.
- They create a classroom environment in which students feel needed and wanted.
- They find approaches that will assist students in mastering the materials.
- They have a belief system that is promising and provides hope, and they offer gentle teaching in a sometimes violent society.
- They lead students toward both social and academic success (Tileston, 2008, p. 56).

The main focus, however, will concentrate on: effective urban teachers are persistent and constantly pursue strategies and activities so that all children can be successful; they possess emotional and physical stamina, which allows them to endure the challenges and crises of urban settings; and they have a belief system that is promising and provides hope, and they offer gentle teaching in a sometimes violent society. One characteristic discussed by Tileston & Darling (2008) is effective urban teachers are persistent and constantly pursue strategies and activities so that all children can be successful (Tileston, 2008, p. 56). If teachers want an increase in student engagement, they will have to manage to teach to the child. Using different strategies and activities that are geared toward how certain ethnic groups function culturally is vital. For example, Catherine Collier, author of *Separating Difference from Disability* (2011), wrote that Navajo children characteristically rarely speculate about motives, the past or the present. It is a part of their cultural identity (Collier, 2011, p.49). A teacher who respects this about Navajo children will address it in their assessments and will reflect it throughout their differentiated

lessons, as supported by Collier's (2011) research which suggests that Navajo students are often over assessed and evaluated for special education services when it is really an issue of "acculturation" (Collier, 2011, p. 49).

Culturally responsive teachers possess emotional and physical stamina, which allows them to endure the challenges and crises of urban settings (Tileston, 2008, p. 56). Debby Irving, author of *Waking Up White* (2014), noticed the disparaging differences between students of color and White students while the school supposedly implemented culturally responsive practices. As she often asked staff members why the Black children were receiving consequences for the same behaviors she witnessed in some of the White children, and she was commonly told the Black students were products of their environments, and, as teachers, this was the best way to deal with their behavior as a result of their situations. From Irving's point of view, it only made her wonder 'why'. When teachers do not have the stamina and endurance to teach inner city students and all that comes with them, they fail to provide an equitable education for their students; in turn, their students will not trust them and teachers will lose student engagement.

It is also important for culturally responsive teachers to have a "belief system that is promising and provides hope, and they offer gentle teaching in a sometimes violent society all while [creating] a classroom environment in which students feel needed and wanted" (Tileston, 2008, p. 57). This is especially important when it comes to Black children. Due to the loss of self and identity through slavery and segregation, all too many African Americans are preoccupied with simply surviving in a hostile world. Teachers who are successful in creating this type of learning community, yield students that can sustain productive and critical learning

(Johnston, 2004, p. 65). Furthermore, students will be more engaged in an environment that is conducive to them.

The Culturally Responsive Classroom

A culturally responsive classroom is just as necessary to engagement as the practice itself. Walker Tileston (2008) identifies two attributes of a culturally responsive classroom:

1. The inclusion of students' languages, cultures, and daily experiences into the academic and social context of the school.
2. The explicit teaching of the dominant culture's expectations, so that all children can fully participate (Tileston, 2008, p. 55).

Teachers bear the responsibility of connecting the classroom environment to their culture, the school culture, and the culture of their communities. Since there is a constant increase in students of diverse ethnic backgrounds in schools (Au, 2006), teachers must account for culture. Statistics from the 2005 US census projected by 2012, students of color will account for 24% of the total school population and 20% of the students in the average US classroom live in poverty (Collier, 2011). The census also reported 60% of Culturally Linguistically Diverse (CLD), Limited English Proficient (LEP), and English Language Learners (ELL) in the US speak Spanish at home, 20% speak an Asian Language in the home and 20% speak other languages or dialects in the home (Collier, 2001). To make engagement possible, teachers have to make culture a priority in the classroom.

When considering education, “. . . culture relates directly to individual learning style and to the preferences and values each child holds. . .” (Shalaway, 1997, p. 61). Research shows Black children, Mexican American, and Native American children all have different learning

styles. Many Black children learn better when they are physically active, when there is loyalty in interpersonal spaces, and prefer oral experiences (Shalaway, 1997, p. 64). Most Mexican American children value family. Personal relationships are important and they will be more successful if they have a strong relationship with their teacher. However, unlike Black children, Mexican American children may prefer cognitive generalities and patterns and are more comfortable with broad concepts (Shalaway, 1997, p. 64). According to Shalaway, Native American children are overall reflective thinkers and see things from a worldly point of view. They value acute visual discrimination and use imagery in a skillful manner. Native American children need thinking time and visual stimulation (Shalaway, 1997, p. 64). Although these are just a few research based examples, a culturally responsive classroom would reflect the cultural needs of these types of students.

Culturally responsive classrooms also need to be relevant. They must reflect the cultures and the teaching has to be to the learning style of the child. The objective of a culturally responsive classroom is to make sure the students feel a sense of community or belonging. *Why Culture Counts* (2008) designed a checklist for an effective culturally responsive classroom:

- Use color and designs. This could be ethnic cloths or artwork.
- Provide a variety of multimedia.
- Plan opportunities for creative expression, such as dance, visual arts, choral reading, music and graphic arts.
- Build on previous experiences from students' culture using hands-on learning, and create space for activities and a climate in which they can take risks and feel safe enough to have more questions than answers.

- Arrange tables and desks to facilitate cooperative learning.
- Involve students in the room arrangement and change it often.
- Position your desk to send a message of collaboration rather than authority.
- Plan long- and short-term interest centers (Tileston, 2008, p. 75).

Summary

Being a culturally responsive teacher takes effort and purpose. To be effective, teachers have to know the culture of their student population and research the best practices for their learning styles. In order to have student engagement, trust and relationships have to be built and this can be done by creating an environment where students feel a sense of belonging. Culture is important and must be relevant to their learning. Classroom should reflect their cultures and learning styles in some way. It is important to remember the diversity means all, not just color (Shalaway, 1997, p. 65). There is power in inclusion. Everyone is different and everyone belongs (Irving, 2014, p. 130). The following section will discuss how culturally responsive teaching leads to higher student achievement, thus more engagement from students and more engagement from families and communal members.

Achievement

Introduction

This section focuses on achievement gained from culturally responsive classrooms. With achievement, comes engagement and vice versa. This is seen in the research in relation to culturally responsive practices lead to at least three categories: the Achievement Gap, mindset,

and high expectations and a “culture of error” (Lemov, 2016, p. 66). These categories are found to be necessary because they all have a connection to culture and the group, and culture and the individual. Achievement does not just happen in a vacuum.

The Achievement Gap

Student engagement cannot exist without some gains in their achievement. Race is a factor in the achievement gap “because the variance in performance exists between students of different skin colors” (Singleton, 2006, p. 2). To further support this statement, Irving, author of *Waking Up White* (2014), recounts her excitement for the redrawn district lines so her daughter could attend the neighborhood school with a diverse student population. Eventually to her disappointment, Debby began to notice the “kindergartners who’d learned side by side became first graders who were split into different reading and math groups, uncannily along skin color lines” (Irving, 2014, p. 132). She continues her story by mentioning how she could physically see the disheartened looks on the faces of the students of color as the white students marveled in their progress and her agitation for witnessing “once fully engaged Black students lose their spark” (Irving, 2014, p. 132) for learning.

How might I increase and maintain student engagement through the use of culturally responsive practices with the achievement gap in mind? Since race is a huge factor in the gap, some perspective is needed when it comes to Culturally Responsive Practices. First, Culturally Responsive Teachers realize race is a social construct (Muhammad, 2015, p. 15). Having race be a factor in student achievement is unfathomable, however, it is. Secondly, Culturally Responsive Teachers should teach with culture in mind, but the operative word is teach. Teachers literally

need to teach their students in order for them to be successful regardless of their students' situations. Lastly, Culturally Responsive Teachers understand being empathetic to their students' needs is more beneficial to their students than being sympathetic.

Mindset

When it comes to Culturally Responsive Practices and achievement in regards to engagement, the issue of mindset must be revisited. Dweck (2006) defines a growth mindset as “the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts [and] although people may differ in every which way - in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments - everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (Dweck, 2006, p. 7). Teachers have to be mindful of their perceptions about student abilities in their class. Research shows teachers behave differently toward students they perceive to have low learning ability (Rodriguez and Bellanca, 2007, p. 11). Furthermore, many of the preconceived notions have less to do with ability and more to do with ethnic stereotyping.

When it comes to achievement, it is important for many teachers to stop making assumptions about their students' abilities, their students' families or backgrounds, and using them as a justification for not teaching diverse students. A Culturally Responsive Teacher simply “takes personal responsibility for success or failure of their own teaching” because they know if they do not, student achievement will suffer (Pollock, 2008, p. 254). Student achievement is much more enhanced when teachers effectively take responsibility and do their job.

High Expectations

Students, like adults, experience a fixed mindset especially when it comes to achievement. This is referred to as the Low Effort Syndrome, where students believe their main goal in school is to not work very hard and make things as easy as possible (Dweck, 2006, p. 58). A Culturally Responsive Teacher knows labeling students as low ability or underachievers has an affect on how they feel about their ability to learn and this lowers self efficacy and paralyzes the effort for future success (Cleveland, 2011, p. 190). Kathryn Au, author of *Multicultural Issues and Literacy Achievement (2006)*, found in her study “. . .teachers [without realizing it] may subconsciously absorb long-standing stereotypes that lead them to expect a lower level of academic performance from students of diverse backgrounds. . .” (Au, 2006). Culturally Responsive Practices approach each class with the idea that everyone can learn and everyone will be challenged. Consequently, Culturally Responsive Teachers set high expectations for their students and in turn, their students are more engaged in their learning, achieving higher goals, and experience higher self efficacy.

As teachers set higher expectations for their students, they must also create an environment where students are comfortable making mistakes. This is known as a “culture of error” (Lemov, 2015, p. 64) where “. . .[creating] an environment where students feel safe making mistakes and discussing them will make more time for fixing those mistakes. . .” (Lemov, 2015). A teacher who facilitates this culture of error in the classroom understands the students will be encouraged to use a higher level of thinking and problem solving and will learn from their mistakes. In a culturally responsive classroom, mistakes add value to learning by normalizing the error (Lemov, 2015, p. 67).

Summary

Achievement is certainly a result of engagement especially from teachers and students. The achievement gap is a reality, born from the notion that race is a factor in any child's learning. Since race is only a social construct when it comes to achievement, teachers can best address the gap in achievement by taking responsibility and doing good meaningful teaching. Culturally Responsive Practice require teachers to forget about preconceived notions about race and ability and challenge their students in the classroom. Setting high expectations will motivate students to do better. A fixed mindset limits achievement and changing to a growth mindset makes it so there is no reason for students to stop trying (Dweck, 2006, p. 67). A classroom environment that welcomes mistakes will engage students in learning from them, so creating a culture of error will really change their way of problem solving. Finally, it is important to remember motivation is needed, but it is not enough. Culturally Responsive Practices are vital for high achievement in students (Ford, 1996, p. 47). In the next section, I will discuss the last theme, engagement and the importance of parental, communal and educational involvement to help the question come full circle.

Engagement

Introduction

This section will focus on engagement and the parts of engagement that have stood out the most through the research. Studies have shown that engagement is dependent upon how teachers build relationships with students, families, and the community; engagement and

achievement are symbiotic with each other; and culturally responsive practices make engagement possible. Sternberg is best quoted saying, “the major factor in whether people achieve expertise is not some fixed prior ability, but purposeful engagement” (as quoted in Dweck, 2006, p. 5). The roles of the teacher, the school community, and adult advocacy will be discussed in this section.

The role of a teacher

When it comes to increasing and maintaining student engagement, teachers bear a large amount of responsibility. They have to create an environment that reaches the students, families, and the outside community. In *Better Than Carrots or Sticks* (2015), the writers believe there are three key elements that are considered effective processes for engaging students:

1. **Be proactive** by making sure all processes are focused on the students and taking notice for students needing early interventions.
2. **Be systematic** by having clear guidelines and principles in place to oversee interventions.
3. **Be transparent** by making sure all that are involved (students, families, community) understand the process and have a voice in refining any plans (Smith, Fisher, Frey, 2015, p. 148).

It was mentioned earlier Culturally Responsive Teachers set high expectations for their students. A Culturally Responsive Practice should have a routine or procedure to acknowledge when students are meeting those set expectations (Smith, Fisher, Frey, 2015). Being proactive and having a plan of success as a class and for individual students can act as a reminder to

students when they are off task or not meeting the expectations. It allows both the teacher and the student to be actively engaged in learning (Smith, Fisher, Frey, 2015).

Since teachers are the connection between students and parents, they have to know how to properly communicate with families if they want to increase and maintain engagement. This means having the skill set and being willing to listen, have tact and kindness, show consideration and empathy, also being enthusiastic about the student and showing an understanding of the parent-child relationship (Shalaway, 1997, p. 215). This is extremely important for engagement because many parents do not want to be involved with schools due to their own negative school experiences and these attitudes can affect their child's learning (Senge, 2000, p. 13). Teachers can attempt to remedy this by simply inviting parents to come in for a visit. It engages parents in what Shalaway calls "the open door policy [and it] sets a good tone for school-home relations" (Shalaway, 1997, p. 218).

Role of the School Community

Yes, the teacher is the front face of communication and bears the most responsibility when it comes to getting parents engaged; however, the rest of the school community has ownership in engagement too. Singleton and Linton reported from a study that "the parents involved in schools were disproportionately White" (Singleton & Curtis, 2006, p. 259). They also discovered from that same study when schools reach out to families of color as a community using Culturally Responsive Practices, engagement in school events increased (Singleton & Curtis, 2006, p. 259). Studies have shown that parents' involvement in their children's school not only increases engagement, but also achievement. School culture dictates how families

receive an invitation to feel like they belong. *Waking Up White* (2014) points out how a school culture of disproportionately engaged White parents can shut out families of color without even knowing it is happening. Debby Irving recalls from her personal experience as White parents are able to bond and dominate school presence, it can become more uncomfortable for families of color (Irving, 2014, p. 136). Culturally Responsive classrooms and environments make everyone feel welcome. When it comes to engagement, families of color may feel more or less empowered based on context (Irving, 2014, p. 141).

Advocacy

The final part of this section is about advocacy. Muhammad (2015) bases advocacy on the belief that we can have influence outside of our direct control, and we are obligated to collaborate with others in our attempt to create equitable learning opportunities for all students (Muhammad, 2015, p. 104). Children need adult advocates in their lives until they can learn how to advocate for themselves. Culturally responsive Practices teach children the importance of assertion so they can learn how to advocate their needs. The teacher, however, cannot fully do this without the support of the school community. *Overcoming The Achievement Gap Trap* (2015) outlined five indicators to assess if a school has developed advocacy to increase achievement and engagement:

1. We empower students and parents with information about resources available to them both inside and outside school that promote academic and personal development.

2. We are politically involved as a school unit or in cooperation with an agency or organization to lobby our board of education, state legislature, and federal legislature to pass policies and laws that benefit our students.
3. We educate our parents and community about opportunities and resources available to them to influence local, state, and federal policies that impact our students.
4. We organize to create partnerships with outside agencies to provide additional resources and opportunities for students' academic and personal development.
5. We actively publicize and highlight the achievements of our students, staff, and parents to create a sense of pride and goodwill for our school (Muhammad 2015, p. 105).

Advocating for children requires support from everyone. Essentially, it comes down to the old African proverb - *It takes a village to raise a child.*

Summary

Advocacy, like the roles of the teacher and school community are necessary in increasing and maintaining engagement while using Culturally Responsive Practices. Teachers are huge facilitators in getting all parties involved. They can start by sending memos in the mail, weekly folder or news letter, and by informing the right school committees about what is going on in the classroom. Moving towards Culturally Responsive Practices is habitual and dynamic. There will always be more questions, more literature, and more theories to implement. A culturally responsive teacher has a growth mindset as opposed to a fixed one that stands firm on stereotypes and assumptions about diverse students. Dweck (2006) defines a growth mindset as “the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts [and]

although people may differ in every which way - in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments - everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (Dweck, 2006, p. 7). She is inclusive by understanding all students learn differently, but incorporates the best practices in the way cultures approach education; a Culturally Responsive Teacher takes responsibility for her own teaching and sets high expectations for all students; and she invites parents in to the school community creating a sense of belonging. The following chapter, begins project by preparing the classroom for the first day of school and determining how the frameworks chosen will be applied in the classroom.

CHAPTER THREE

The Project

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to give a description of the project. The question to be researched was *How I might increase and maintain engagement by using Culturally Responsive Practices?* The objective would be to connect the rationale to the research of the question. In order to investigate the relationship between using Culturally Responsive Practices and student engagement, I directly implemented certain Culturally Responsive strategies into my third grade classroom. This served as a control group for the project and enabled me to make adjustments as I worked to answer the research question. I allotted myself six to eight weeks to apply the framework, which will begin on the first day of school.

Audience

The context of this project will focus on why teachers might want to use Culturally Responsive Framework and Practices in their classroom to increase and maintain student engagement, successes and challenges I have experienced while trying to facilitate the environment for this type of growth. The target group for this project is for any teachers that have a diverse group of students including students with different cultural backgrounds. Since teachers are the face of the classroom, it is important for them to create an environment where every child can show up authentically and feel safe and comfortable learning. In many classrooms (not just urban classrooms), student populations are changing and it is imperative that

teachers reach their students' needs as a communal learner and as an individual learner. This is where the rationale for the project becomes beneficial for the audience.

Throughout the research for this project, I demonstrated that teachers have the highest responsibility in regard to student engagement initially. Consequently, I will have to know and understand the diverse populations of my classroom and decide how Culturally Responsive Practices will affect each student and how Culturally Responsive Practices will impress upon how students engage with learning. In addition to this, I will also need to consider which cultural strategies will be the most relevant. The following section will discuss the framework used for the question and project, along with the rationale behind the choice of methods.

Framework & Choice of Methods

Culturally Responsive Practice is an educational framework and was designed to support a curriculum. A Culturally Responsive Framework bears many attributes, which were described in chapter two; however, this section will discuss them more in depth to better understand the rationale. I will be implementing a guide from *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* as a part of my framework along with tools from *Strategies for Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning* and *AVID Culturally Relevant Teaching*. This section is especially important because it exposes how the brain works in response to culture in general. Our nervous system is designed to guide us toward avoiding threats, approaching rewards and things that will make us feel good, and attaching to others for safety and companionship; therefore, [the challenge of being a culturally responsive teacher] is knowing how to create an environment that the brain perceives as safe and nurturing so it can relax, let go of stress, and

turn its attention to learning (Hammond, 2015). Hammond also identifies Culturally Responsive Brain Rules that I will use as a framework while conducting my project and they are as follows:

1. The brain seeks to minimize social threats and maximize opportunities to connect with others in community (p. 47).
2. Positive relationships keep our safety-threat detection system in check (p. 48).
3. Culture guides how we process information (p. 48).
4. Attention drives learning (p. 48).
5. All new information must be coupled with existing funds of knowledge in order to be learned (p. 48).
6. The brain physically grows through challenge and stretch, expanding its ability to do more complex thinking and learning (p. 49).

For the purpose of this project, I chose these frameworks solely because they were specifically designed for Culturally Responsive Practices. Additionally, I have experienced these methods in professional developments and have witnessed them in school cultures. Hammond suggest that teachers need to be self reflective and intentional when preparing to become a practitioner of Culturally Responsive Teaching. Hollie (2015) suggests more than just being a Culturally Responsive teacher. This framework presses upon the importance of teachers being Culturally and Linguistically Responsive where the main purpose is to focus on culture and language. And like Hammond, Hollie believes self reflection is imperative to being a Culturally Responsive teacher. “Becoming culturally responsive means that your instruction changes for the better” (Hammond, 2015, p. 11). Hypothetically, this transformative instructional change means “if you are culturally responsive in your teaching, then it can renovate or overhaul your

instruction” (Hammond, 2015, p. 12). Finally, this approach is the best framework for a project of a first year teacher like myself. I can apply these practices in my own classroom and experience the change and results in real time. It would be easy for me to document how certain aspects of the frameworks were implemented and if they worked for my students. The final section of this chapter discusses the project description and the timeline.

Project Description & Timeline

The physical project portion of this research was initiated in my classroom from day one of the school year. It made sense to implement this framework at the start of the year because this is where community along with rituals and routines are built. “Routines are a way to make space for the important affirming/communal activities that create social bonds among students” (Hammond 2015). Hammond (2015) also discusses how rituals “reinforce elements of academic mindset” letting students know they can achieve their goals (Hammond, 2015, p. 147). As I thought about how I wanted the days, weeks, and year to progress for my students, the very first rituals and routines seemed to be the most vital and naturally the first six to eight weeks were the most important. I knew ahead of time I would have six English Learner students who were in need of more support than their peers in the classroom next door. There would also be five new students that I would know nothing about and I was positive I had at least one student with an IEP; then there was the rest of the students. In order to make the transition into what is considered an upper elementary grade, these students needed to have a classroom that made them feel comfortable and inviting. They will also need to have a safe space physically and emotionally and a classroom to grow academically in their own way.

My classroom was set up in group of four to five students per table. The morning routine was designed to get them to be responsible for the pencils at their tables and to write three personal goals to accomplish each day before doing morning work. The objective was to have them be responsible for the tables and make sure they help each other by making sure someone provide everyone with enough pencils for the day. I also wanted them to reflect on themselves in our environment making sure they feel they can accomplish big and small goals.

A visual aid with words and pictures was designed to hang at eye level for them to check in and remember each day. I chose to use an interactive song to prompt them to clean up and get ready for morning meeting. Each day there are two new VIP students who serve as morning meeting leaders (and class helpers). Their job was to collaborate before morning meeting to choose a greeting and class activity. The objective is to give them responsibility, choice and ownership in the classroom. For three weeks, I modeled how to facilitate morning meetings. I would begin singing the circle time song letting them know it was time to clean up and sit around the carpet. Next, I informed them of the morning greeting and modeled how it should look and sound. Finally, I would teach or review a morning activity for us to engage in to start the day. After about two weeks, the V.I.P's initiated the morning meeting with my assistance. Now they lead morning meeting without my guidance.

I inserted two types of call and responses when I wanted the students' attention, so when I would say, "hey, hey, listen up," they would respond "hey, hey, listen up!" We practiced it several times with the expectation that voices would be silent and all eyes would be on the teacher. Practicing calling the attention signal and having the students respond several times is

what Hollie (2015) considers culturally responsive management and they should be reminded of the importance of it when they do not respond.

The rationale behind rituals and routines is necessary in teaching Culturally Responsive practices and students must be able to connect to what is important behind them (Hammond, 2015). An example of this is the development of our classroom rules. We sat around the carpet and discussed what rules would make our classroom a strong community. As I the students took turns stating a classroom rule, I used a Jenga Tower to write each rule the students shared. Each block on the Jenga Tower represents one of our classroom rules, so there are fifty-four rules. Admittedly, these are plenty rules; however, the rules are variations of be safe, be kind, be respectful, be cooperative, and be responsible etc. Afterward, we built the tower together in representation of our classroom community and values. They know each block represents our strengths as a class, and when rules are broken, they must remove a block visually and physically making our community weaker. Because they value our community, they really strive to keep every block stacked everyday. Conversely, the students are disappointed when someone has to remove a block, and they work that much harder to make good choices so they can add them back.

As I considered my core instruction, math and literacy centers had to offer choice and activity, for example, math center allows the students to continue to work on proficiency as they practice the different skills taught over the last four weeks. On any given day, my students can be seen doing different interactive activities during math; while some are using whiteboards and place value dice, others are using cards for 10, Go Fish, iPads for decimal work that is not a downloaded application, or they may choose to write on their journal pages or finish group work.

They are using math language and helping each other do math. When we initially started math, we discussed the importance of making mistakes and self discovery. They know I will challenge them to think about how to solve a problem and talk about the strategies involved in solving them. I also had them practice working as a collaborative team at their tables because collaboration builds community (AVID 2016). It was not an easy task for me to accomplish, but they are more comfortable having a discussion as a table during whole group activities after practicing.

In literacy block, I introduced Total Physical Response (TPR). This was something I learned during student teaching, especially for dependent learners. Since I have a range of reading levels in my classroom and many of students are not reading at grade level, a TPR is useful for those who are not visual or audio, but more kinesthetic. “Our ability to process, store and use information dictates whether we are able to do more complex and complicated thinking in the future because they are the very things that stimulate brain growth” (Hammond, 2015, p. 124). There is a TPR for most of the reading strategies and I model these strategies with both familiar and unfamiliar books. During guided reading, the students practice each of the reading strategies so they will begin to use them independently and grow as readers. “Students need to learn and internalize cognitive routines in order to move toward more independent learning” (Hammond, 2015, p. 140). I want my students to get the tools they need and know how to transfer those skills into everyday life.

Culturally Responsive teaching encourages an incredible relationship or trust component, and AVID suggests part of creating a Culturally Relevant classroom is to greet students at the door in the morning and engage them in a conversation (AVID, 2016). Thus, each morning

students are greeted and asked how they are doing. This usually leads to small conversations and then they are off to do their morning routine. This not only is important because it builds relationships with the students and models conversational skills, it also lets my students know that I am genuinely interested in their personal lives and situations. This builds trust and authentic relationships. Each Friday during morning meeting, I have a notebook and conduct a weekend check in, making inquiries about what they are going to do or would like to do for the weekend and write it in the notebook. The following Monday, I lead a weekend update, where I refer to the notebook and am able to follow up with their plans. At first, they perceived it as something rather odd; however, as it resulted in getting to know each other, they look forward to it every Monday and Friday.

Ideally, I would like for the timeline of this project to range between 8-12 weeks, as there are many areas I have not gotten to apply the framework. Realistically, this project will have to be approximately 6-8 weeks long. I think that is enough time to see more definitive results allowing me to be able to complete the fourth chapter of this capstone project.

Summary

Chapter three encompasses an overview of about the project rationale in relation to my project. I have outlined examples of how I am implementing Culturally Responsive Practices into my classroom and they are supported by the references I used as a framework. The audience has been identified and there is a clear timeline leading to the end of the project. In Chapter four, I will talk about my successes and challenges in regard to my research question, *How might I*

increase and maintain engagement through the use of Culturally Responsive Practices? and discuss how I applied certain parts of the framework.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

I began this project with the question: *How might I increase and maintain engagement through the use of Culturally Responsive Practices?* Initially, when I thought about this question, it seemed to be narrow enough to research a definite answer. To my surprise, however, it turned into a much broader question than anticipated. As I immersed myself into the research, I discovered that diversity was much more than race. Since I had worked in the same urban school district for over ten years and had diversity training, I thought this project would be easy to research and implement. Being honest, I thought because I am a Black woman, using culturally responsive practices would come naturally and easily for me. I was completely wrong.

Throughout the project portion of my research, I found that I fell into the same assumptions trap I had been warned about through my research, like thinking because they were Black boys from another school, they were troublemakers who wanted to cause trouble at my school; or maybe they were no longer welcomed at their former school and were asked to leave; or perhaps they were academically low and would exhaust me as a teacher. There were also many days where I purposefully used practices I thought would never work for urban area students and unexpectedly gained something different than expected. I realized I had been influenced deeply by the works of Dweck (2006), Irving (2014), and Shalaway (1997) as their words stay with me as I am teaching my class. Dweck (2006) work is a constant reminder that having a growth mindset is necessary for learning in any situation. This is also a standard I hold my own students to as I encourage them to keep making mistakes. I will never forget the sadness in Irving's (2014) voice as she narrated how students of color disengaged and left behind

in their school experiences and Shalaway (1997) continues to make me think about how culture affects how students learn. In this chapter, I will talk about how these authors inspired me along with the implications of this project, unexpected results and what I have learned, limitations and finally, how I intend to communicate my results.

My Findings

As I reflect upon my application of *How might I increase and maintain engagement through the use of Culturally Responsive Practices?* in my classroom, I was astonished by how things began to unfold in my classroom. My first mistake was having a preset assumption about many of the students in my class, especially for the Black boys that were new to the school. Because I had researched the schools they came from and day one did not go so well for them, my assumptions about them were validated that they would be the students to cause me the most trouble. For example, since one of the students transferred from a school with a reputation for having extreme behavior issues, I assumed he was going to be a behavior issue for me. Knowing this student now, I can positively say that school lost a student that would have made their community stronger. I found that when it came to being a Culturally Responsive teacher, old habits die hard. I had to bring myself back to Muhammad's (2009) theory about mindset. How teachers have to change their set attitudes and have a growth mindset in order to be successful culturally responsive teachers.

With this project in mind, I had to consider what environment I facilitated for those boys on the first day of school and how a lack of boundaries had been missing enabling their behaviors to not meet my expectations. I had to think about my responsibility as a classroom

teacher and not impose my preconceived notions upon these children in particular. Initially, my students did not have assigned seats and were allowed to choose their seats until there was a need for them. These students required more structure, therefore assigned seats would provide them with the opportunity to their best. After re-evaluating this situation and applying the research, a Culturally Responsive teacher would move forward without feelings and set firm perimeters for the behavior expectations.

During this eight week project, I experienced unexpected findings. I did not think it would be possible to convince urban school students that community is everything. By using Culturally Responsive Practices, I was able to model community symbolically by using a Jenga tower. Since the tower represented our classroom community, they were told it was not a toy. Therefore, they were not allowed to knock it down on purpose. It also represents their own rules, so they had that sense of responsibility for it. To my surprise, my students only removed blocks from the Jenga tower twice and it has remained standing every single day since we started it. I also incorporated another sense of ownership by letting them run their own Morning Meeting. They ran Morning Meeting responsibly, with their bodies calm and ready to begin the day after I modeled the expectations and guided them in practice when they deviated from that expectation. While they are not without fault, none of their minor infractions resulted in punitive consequences. They know they will have to practice a task until it is done to my expectations. It is not something they love as a class, but they respect it. This is something I never expected. I also never expected to be so inspired or influenced by the authors of much of my research, not to mention the implications of what I am doing in my classroom.

Influences and Implications

Almost everyday I think about Debby Irving's (2014) story about the Black students losing their affinity for learning and school. As I faced the challenge of the achievement gap, I felt inspired and emboldened to do better for them. After a few days, I had already contacted parents of students whose academics were of alarming concern to me, and those parents that care about their children's academic needs, and I wanted them to be involved and informed. The parents actually check in with me via Class Dojo to tell me what they are doing at home to support academics and to just check in on how their child is doing. I even had a set of parents who visit at least once a week. Because of this line of open communication, I was able to express major concerns with parents and students comfortably, authentically and immediately. For one student in particular, I asked him how he felt he learned best so we could work together to improve his reading. His feedback really helped me plan my lessons and make adaptations for him. I have learned that Culturally Responsive Teachers allow their students to have voice and choice and ownership in their learning. Instead of being disengaged because of learning frustrations, this student now asks questions to strengthen and support his learning.

When it comes to other influences, Shalaway (1997) wrote about how culture affects how people are as learners. After my direct instruction, I allowed students to work on the new skill in the way they see fit. Many of them work in pairs, some in small groups, others work independently next to another student. They appreciate having the privilege of working in any space in the room or at any table. At any point in time, they are always working on a skill that has been taught. What I found to be interesting about how they choose to work, is that it seemed almost instinctual. I never taught them how to work so well together and yet they are working in

a natural way that works for them. Sometimes I walk around and check on their group work, but since they had not mastered a proper work voice, I could hear many of their interactions during math time. They are using rich math language and redirecting each other. If I heard students off task, I would redirect their focus back to math. All I needed to do was facilitate that environment.

So what are the implications of my research question? I do think my research might inspire other educators to try this approach. Do not think my research will contribute any new findings to Culturally Responsive Practices or Culturally Responsive Teaching? No, I do not, but I do think it will help others realize the limitations of this framework. It is extremely difficult to apply a framework that requires a complete change in mindset. With every lesson or action I brought into my classroom, I had to let go of something else for the benefit of my students; truly valuing being able to have a growth mindset because I have worked so hard for it. With that growth mindset, comes my personal gains and personal growth as a teacher.

Personal Growth

There is much that has been gifted to me since beginning this research. I learned many things about myself while pursuing this project. The first thing I learned as a Black woman is that race has a lot to do with everything, however, it is not the only thing. I have a better understanding of what Culturally Responsive Practices are about and just because I am a woman of color, it is not automatic. This was a challenging project. The research was easy, but when it came to implementation into my classroom, there was more to consider. When thinking about Culturally Responsive Practices, it was always very purposeful and calculated.

Another thing I learned about myself as a student is my time management skills are terrible and that writing is a practice; almost an artform. Working on a capstone requires more than just checking in on assignments. I realized I needed to be more focused and flexible with my work and personal life. This was where I struggled to find the balance. As I did my writing, began to understand how much rigor and stamina it takes to produce this level of work. This was a good opportunity for me to reflect on myself as an individual, professional, and student. While my project has come to an end, there is still more to complete as I consider how to best communicate my results.

Conclusion

How might I increase and maintain engagement through the use of Culturally Responsive Practices? So far, I have observed active engagement in my classroom. Not only from the students, but also from some of the parents. I allowed some of authors of my research to inspire and influence my decisions when it came to implementing Culturally Responsive Practices. It took a short amount of time for me to realize Culturally Responsive Practices are not just about race and making it work for my students was not going to work because I am Black. If I wanted a classroom of fully engaged students, I had to have a growth mindset. That was probably one of the most important aspects and challenges of this project. I do not think I reinvented the wheel, but I am proud to say my students love learning in our community and most of their parents are happy to do what they can to support their children.

