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CULTURALLY RELEVANT SMALL-GROUP STRATEGIES TO INCREASE
ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to Research

Introduction

“Educators in the United States have a legal and ethical obligation to ensure some level of equity and equality of opportunity for all students” (Clayton, 2010). Classrooms are changing with the increase of diversity within students. However, practices and curriculum are some elements that are not changing as regularly with our demographic of students, especially our students of color. “The current education system was designed during the agrarian era and only slightly modified during industrial times and it was created with the intent of imparting values and skills of these times onto students” (Cox, 2019). In return, educators are failing to support all students in the classroom by incorporating different cultures regularly within our everyday classroom procedures.

This capstone will study how educators can support diverse students by incorporating Culturally Responsive teaching or Culturally Relevant teaching, “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes,” through small-group strategies to increase engagement in African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20).

Background of the Researcher

Growing up in Connecticut, I frequently heard stories from my family about how we were the only white family in the neighborhood. When we moved to Minnesota, this was no longer the experience we had. Our middle school in Minnesota was originally grades 6-8. My brother was the first class of fifth grade students to begin at the middle school after they added the new grade. This class had five students of color graduate at the end of their high school careers. Five years later, about a third to half of the graduating class was comprised of students from all different backgrounds and ethnicities. I grew up always being around a diverse population that continued to grow and welcome diversity as the years went on. To me, this was second nature. This became even more of a norm when the school went on to become International Baccalaureate certified and welcomed all students from multiple different districts surrounding the area. It was not until I began my first teaching job in a predominantly white district that made me realize that not all schools accurately reflect our current population of students.

The first school that I taught at was set in a rural community that provided education to students in an alternative approach. Between working at the three schools within town, community involvement was inevitable. Out of the four classes taught, only five students identified as “non-white.” The importance of reading different types of writing and genres was a goal within the classroom. Multiple authors were incorporated from different time periods, different demographics, and different ethnicities. Often times the choice authors were met with questions such as “why are we reading this?” and “why

is this important?” Regardless of the efforts in answering these questions, students could not relate to the context as deeply as I would have hoped due to the pedagogy not reflecting their culture in the right way. Life experiences among these students were similar, so they were not exposed to other cultures within their peers as I had been growing up.

After one year, I left that school and found my way back to the school I had attended while growing up. I was excited to be back in a familiar atmosphere where I felt at home. However, this home was new with different demographics of students and more culture shock than I previously had experienced. I did not realize how much more of a culture shock we as a staff were in for until we began training in Dr. Sharroky Hollie’s Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching (CLR) trainings. At these training sessions, it became obvious how many students of color are not supported as much as they should be in the classroom. In many schools and districts the curriculum is the same from 20+ years ago. The current curriculum taught at my school is the same curriculum when I, and my mother, were students at this school. This curriculum has some of the same traits: older stories, predominantly written by white males, a lack of diversity within the chosen authors, and outdated assessments that a lot of curriculums still encompass in today’s classroom. Although our students had changed throughout the years, the curriculum had not.

After two years of being a part of CLR training, I was chosen to be coached in CLR practices. Under the watchful eye of a trained coach from Dr. Hollie’s team, I was

observed two different times. During these observations the coach would look for CLR strategies that were incorporated within a lesson, as well as how effective these strategies were within the lesson. The coach would look at the percentage of students on task during each strategy and follow along with the rubric designed by Dr. Hollie. During these observations I was made completely aware of how much I did not incorporate these strategies regularly and with purpose within my daily practices. My goal was to challenge myself to regularly implement CLR strategies into my classes. This goal became my Individual Growth Plan (IGP) for myself, while the school also chose to adapt their own goal to better support our students of color. Each week the amount of strategies that were incorporated were counted and reflected upon on how well these strategies were used. Some strategies used were call and response as well as small-group strategies such as whip arounds and a gallery walk. Looking at engagement levels within my students, as well as the recorded levels of understanding between my kids that did participate in the strategies, compared to those that did not, there was easily a difference. After a month of keeping track of this data, I found that CLR strategies, especially small-group strategies, became a natural thought as lessons were planned. My classroom is already set up for students to work together as small groups, so incorporating purposeful lessons that encouraged students to take risks and expand their levels of understanding together was an important aspect of CLR that I wanted to master. However, fellow colleagues within the building weren't having as much success in engagement levels.

Besides being introduced to CLR, there was one curriculum that was implemented to support our diverse population: AVID. AVID, which stands for Advancement Via

Individual Determination, is a college readiness program that helps students who are predominately from non-white, lower income households, an academic middle student, and are the first member of the family to be college bound. “AVID students often come from a more challenged, disadvantaged background” (Advancement Via Individual Determination [AVID], 2002). I had my first hands-on experience with AVID my second year into teaching at the middle school and since then, I have been a huge believer of this program. I was able to get a firsthand experience on all the different tools that AVID offers to help students be college and career ready while also holding them accountable. I was not truly convinced in the miracle of AVID until I had the opportunity to teach it myself.

This program naturally incorporates strategies that celebrate different cultures and includes current events within the world in order to get the students to be higher level education ready. Lessons are already provided for each grade level on a day to day basis. The lessons are also scaffolded for each grade level so that a progression is built up over the years to achieve the goal of success. In 2018, 99% of AVID seniors in Minnesota graduated from High School (Data / Graduation Success Rates at AVID Districts/Schools, 2019). I was trained in teaching AVID as an elective teacher as well as trained into incorporating AVID strategies into a Language Arts classroom. These strategies were synonymous to CLR strategies, just with different names. One of the common themes I noticed in AVID is how many strategies encourage the students to work together as small groups. This program is set up for the students to feel validated, supported, and heard; regardless of their demographics. This program is a home for

students who do not normally get as much support as they deserve, without compromising the character of the student. AVID is one of the first programs I was introduced to that works towards the goal of closing the academic achievement gap.

AVID and CLR training gave me exposure into how our education system is flawed, especially towards students of color. This flawed system became more aware when I continued my education through my Master's classes. As these classes began immediately there was encouragement to look at our own classrooms and the classrooms around us to see how our system is failing to support students of color. During Graduate School, a class that challenged me to continue to notice the injustices throughout our nation was a classroom management class. In this class we read a book that hit too close to home for me. This book was written by a white female who had predominantly students of color within her classes. She discussed the situations and lifestyles of each student, and the challenges her students of color particularly faced. In this book she describes how she at first did not know how to best support her students, but then had to look back at her own biases, beliefs, and practices in order to provide an environment that was supportive to her students of color. One theme that she always came back to; incorporating culture within her classroom that the students could relate to, feel validated with, and always feel supported. I was surprised at first, but then thought back to my own school and how we are just starting our path to being culturally responsive for our students.

Current Study

CLR strategies are one of many popular topics when it comes to modernizing the classroom to support the current student. Diversity within classrooms is changing. Classrooms are not just for one race, and the methods behind those classrooms should reflect this change both in curriculum and training. However, there isn't as much research on how the proper training for white teachers can impact the motivation and engagement with students of color in the classroom. Social skills are lacking due to the amount of technology that is available. Students shy away from working with one another, choosing instead to work independently. It is important to encourage students to work with one another to improve their own social skills, while also encompassing culturally responsive small-group strategies so that all students feel supported. This capstone will show how culturally responsive small-group strategies can improve engagement in African-American students. Culturally responsive small-group strategies can easily be incorporated into lessons in order to improve engagement in African-American students.

Conclusion and Chapter Previews

Chapter 2 will discuss and review the literature that describes the importance of supporting and recognizing diversity within the classroom. Current literature discusses the importance for teachers to be properly educated on supporting all demographics of students within the classroom. Culturally responsive small-group strategies can result in lasting positives amongst educators and diverse students. It is important to recognize these positives and to learn how to incorporate these strategies into classrooms today.

Chapter 3, will discuss the methods used to research the topic and the process for creating a staff development that introduces these small-group strategies and the need to incorporate them within educator's lessons. Chapter 4 will provide insight into the project and Chapter 5 will provide a conclusion to the project.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction to Literature

With an ever-changing world, our education system needs to keep up with the diversity in our students by creating an equitable education for all students. Each student is deserving of an education, while also being supported in every way to obtain the education they are entitled to. Geneva Gay (2010) states:

More and more ethnically and racially diverse students, families, communities, and their advocates are demanding the right to be recognized, respected, and educated for who they are, instead of having to conform to Eurocentric norms as a condition for receiving high-quality educational opportunities (p. 143).

All students should have access to the same education, which means that educators need to understand each of their students in order to make sure that they are receiving the same opportunities in school. Schools are changing; in response, educators need to change their approach in teaching to support the growth in diversity that American schools are experiencing today.

There are inequalities within education. In general there are inequalities with curriculum and that curriculum supporting students of color. “The United States has

allowed schools to have an unequal distribution of academic resources for far too long” (Cox, 2018). Schools frequently ask the question: how can educators best support the diverse population of students? A question that still has not been answered.

Chapter One introduced the importance of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching (CLR), purported by Dr. Sharroky Hollie and others. Being exposed to CLR showcased how education in today’s world is not fully supporting the students of color. Educators are realizing that there is a lack of training to support the different demographics of students in the classroom. Not all schools were bringing in programs to expose their educators to culturally and linguistically responsive strategies in order to better understand the diverse population. Other educators are entitled to the exposure of CLR programs to better support the diverse population within classrooms today. CLR strategies, along with AVID strategies, Advancement Via Individual Determination, a college readiness program for underrepresented students, better showcase how a classroom should look in order to support all students, regardless of their demographics. Hence, the research question being investigated in this capstone: How can educators support diverse students by incorporating culturally responsive small-group strategies to increase engagement in middle-school African-American students? Looking at the relevant research, which is summarized in this chapter, it becomes clear there is a need to recognize and support all of our non-white students in order to close the achievement gap that is familiarly associated with our diverse population of students. Specifically this capstone looks at the African-American population of students and

addresses the need to recognize our African-American students in the classroom by incorporating elements of their culture within the curriculum.

This chapter introduces the historical contexts of integration and discusses the need to support our students of color, specifically middle-school students within the classroom. Middle school students are changing during this period in their lives, and it is important to know what is going on developmentally in order to better understand the needs they require. There is a struggle of engagement that African-American students display in the classroom. This is a key component for the necessity of incorporating culturally responsive strategies regularly into lessons. Chapter two also introduces the impact that culturally responsive strategies can have on the middle-school student. Looking at how small group culturally responsive strategies can impact engagement within African-American students will show the need for these programs. Teachers need to be properly educated and consistently trained to be able to provide an equitable education for all students. Finally, this capstone explains why all these elements are important, and describes the project that can help other educators incorporate strategies that increase engagement levels in African-American students within their classrooms.

Historical Context

Schools first began their integration process in the 1950s after the court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Many schools have found success with following the mandated integration, while other schools have seemed to revert back to times before the court case. In some schools in the south, racial and economic segregation

has steadily increased to levels last seen in the 1960s (Mehta, S., Finnegan, M., Mason, M., Blume, H., & Pearce, M., 2019). In the last five to ten years, civil rights groups have stepped up to try and reduce the amount of discrimination and racial profiling within schools. One of the first problems is exposing the inconsistencies that are occurring within African-American students in today's schools.

African-American students are facing greater rates of suspension, expulsion and arrest than their white classmates according to recent studies in the Civil Rights Data Collection. The data from the 2015-2016 school year revealed that there were about 2.7 million suspensions, about 100,000 fewer than the previous two years. However, the number of students that are being referred to law enforcement and arrests on school grounds or at school activities is increasing. 291,000 referrals and arrests were reported in the 2015-2016 school year, which is an increase of about 5,000 from the two previous years. African-American students accounted for 15% of the student body the 2015-2016 school year but make up 31% of the arrests. Two years prior, African-American students made up 16% of the student body, but only 27% of the arrests (Balingit, 2018). Clearly, there is a discrepancy when it comes to African-American students getting equal opportunities in their education.

Judith Browne Dianis, executive director of the national office of the Advancement Project, a civil rights group, stated:

The facts are in black and white for all to see: Racism is alive and well in our American school system. This data clearly shows that black students are less safe,

more restrained and pushed out of school more than other students. We need to see the Department of Education commit to the vigorous defense of students' right to be free from discriminatory school discipline (as cited in Balingit, 2018).

There have been efforts in trying to expose the inconsistencies within the Obama administration. During his time in office, President Obama worked with Civil Rights movement groups to require schools to report their data in suspensions, bullying, resolutions, and investigations online (Blad, 2016). The hope he wished to see was that the pattern of racial discrepancies would be identified and a push for schools to take steps in the right direction for changing the injustices would become a priority.

African-American students have had to fight for equal education rights. However, this fight has seemed to revert to the past instead of improving for the future. African-American students are still dealing with academic gaps that are hindering them when it comes to their future successes. Understanding the past, and knowing the current biases is important for correcting this concerning collection of data. In order to take a step in the right direction, educators need to first understand what the current classroom looks like in terms of the student demographics and find solutions by providing the best support systems, teachers, and curriculum available.

Diversity in Today's Classroom

American classrooms are becoming more racially diverse as each year passes. On the surface, the look of each classroom is changing, but behind the scenes, the lessons are not keeping up with the change in reflection to the students. In a 2014 survey by the

Department of Education, classrooms were projected to have the majority of the students no longer be white. This is a change from the common findings of schools being predominantly filled with white students. While the classrooms are changing in terms of demographics, the demographics of teachers remains predominantly white females; 80.1% to be exact in the year of 2015-2016 (Fay, 2018). In order to celebrate our diverse students, we need to give them role models that they can relate to.

In school, students tend to look up to the teachers that remind them of themselves, or people with whom they have things in common (Griner & Stewart, 2012, p. 586). In our current schools this becomes hard with teachers not matching the breakdown of their students. It becomes more difficult when staff programs and collegiate programs aren't accounting for the new diversity that are in the classrooms.

Furthermore, while there has been a recent influx in research discussing culturally responsive practice as a means of addressing inequity in education, teachers and school staff lack clear examples and tools for best practices that will aid them in addressing the achievement gap and disproportionality effectively within their schools and classrooms" (Fiedler, 2008 as cited in Griner & Stewart, 2012, p. 586).

In order to provide an equitable education for all students, there needs to be training in best practices for educators.

The demographics in American schools continue to change and increase regarding diversity within our students. According to the Department of Education, by the year 2023 diversity in schools will be at an all-time high as seen in Figure 1 below.

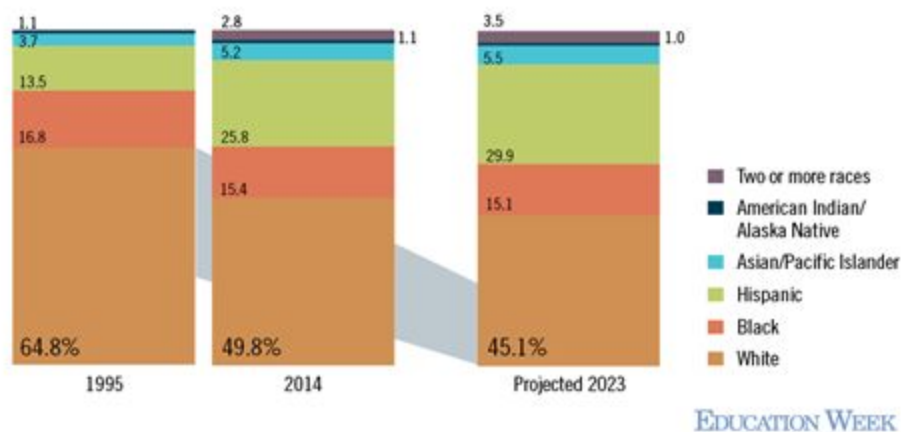


Figure 1: Changing Demographics in American Schools

This graph shows the demographic breakdown of students in American schools in the past and the projection for diversity in the near future. The number of white students in comparison to other races is decreasing as the years continue to pass. In Minnesota public schools, 34% of K-12 students are non-white, while teachers of color only make up 5%. (Mahamud & Webster, 2018). It is important that schools are prepared for the new diversity in order to provide an equitable education for all students. Schools can take steps to supporting diverse students and reducing the achievement gap by hiring more educators from different demographics, modernizing the curriculum in correlation to the current student, and not teaching to standardized tests (Cox, 2018). In order to provide an

equitable education for each student, schools must re-evaluate the approaches their current students are receiving.

Middle-School Students

Middle school students are typically between the ages of 11-14. During this time there are many changes that are going on with a student emotionally, cognitively, and physically. “Around the age of 11 or 12, children learn to think about abstract concepts. They complete what Piaget termed the concrete operational period and enter the formal operational period” (Anthony, n.d.). All these factors need to be considered and understood when it comes to teaching middle school students. During this time, children are displaying logical thinking and their methodical approach to problems are improving. At this stage, adolescent egocentrism emerges. “Adolescent egocentrism is the belief that others are highly invested in and attentive to their appearance and actions (imaginary audience) and that their experiences and emotions are unique and known only to and by them (personal fable)” (Anthony). During this stage, many changes are occurring within the student’s brain.

Young adolescents’ brains are evolving during this time. As educators, it’s important to know the development capabilities that students can handle at this time in order to not overwhelm the students into acting out. According to Peter Lorain (n.d), a former high-school teacher and middle-school principal, discusses how teachers can best support middle school students in their lessons to coincide with what their brain developments can handle. He suggests four ideas:

1. Present limited amounts of new information, to accommodate the short-term memory.
2. Provide opportunities for students to process and reinforce the new information and to connect the new information with previous learning. (Encourage students to talk with their classmates about the new information; have them debate or write about it; create small group discussions.)
3. Provide lessons that are varied, with lots of involvement and hands-on activities. Brain stimulus and pathways are created and made stronger and with less resistance if they are reinforced with a variety of stimuli. (Create projects; use art, music, and visual resources; bring guest visitors into the classroom.)
4. Provide lessons and activities that require problem solving and critical thinking. Brain growth is enhanced and strengthened through practice and exercise

Young adolescents are continually changing physically, mentally, emotionally, and cognitively (“Teenage Development”). In order to provide an equitable education for all students, we as educators also need to recognize these developmental changes that are occurring in our students to provide lessons that help them be successful. Educators need to understand the different identities both on the inside and outside that students are struggling with on a daily basis. African-American students are one of the groups of

students that struggle the most with not being stereotyped in education. As a result, their identity is typically not shown in a positive portrayal.

African-American Students in Today's Classroom

African-American students are one of the most underrepresented groups of students that are not supported with the appropriate responses in an educational setting. (Griner & Stewart, 2012) In fact, many times, African-American students are falsely labeled and put into the wrong type of support system in education. Griner and Stewart, states, "African American children are significantly overrepresented in special education programs, specifically in the categories of mild mental retardation (MMR) and severely emotionally disturbed (SED)" (Griner & Stewart, 2012, p. 587). Many times, educators are falsely identifying African-American students just so they can have some sort of solution to the undesired behavior that is prevalent in the classroom.

African-American students are facing many hardships by the time they start school. It has been noted that African-American children are separated more frequently from their families and end up in foster care more often (Ryan, Herz, Hernandez, & Marshall, 2007). This separation can negatively impact African-American children economically, psychologically, and educationally (Huntington, 2006). Many educators believe that when children begin school the negative hardships are neutralized by the educational opportunities they experience. In reality, this isn't true, as the elements heavily associated to increasing the achievement gap, have already influenced the gap by

the age of three (Burchinal et al., 2011). Many times, it is African-American males that are facing the most hardships and failed support in schools and society.

African-American males are often stereotyped; as a result, they are often left behind in education. “Today’s African American males do not have a reason to fight because they cannot access a decent education; and therefore, their fate will lie in being forgotten within society as a whole” (Bracey, 2009 as cited in Benskin, 2015).

African-American males have higher rates of suspensions in schools in comparison to their white counterparts, as well as being often labeled as incomprehensible, uneducated, and dangerous (Jackson & Moore, 2008, as cited in Benskin, 2015). When African-American students, specifically male, are already identified in a negative light, how are they expected to be successful in school?

It is important to understand the expectations and false stereotypes that African-American students are facing each day in order to make a change. Educators first must have better support systems in place to provide equitable educational opportunities for our African-American students. “Statistics reveal African American males are overrepresented in Special Education, underrepresented in Gifted and Talented programs, overrepresented in school suspension and out of school suspension as well as expulsion rates (Carroll, 2007; Dalton, 2009, as cited in Benskin, 2015). Educators need to make sure that they aren’t pushing African-Americans into the SPED route if they truly don’t need those services. One thing that we as educators can begin right away to support our

African-American students is incorporating culturally responsive strategies into the classroom.

Culturally Responsive Strategies

Before considering culturally responsive strategies, it is important to understand what culturally responsive teaching is. Culturally responsive teaching should be understood as a complex and intricate set of processes that many practitioners and researchers have suggested may improve student learning (Gay, 2010). Cultural disconnects between the students and their educational institutes may be contributing to the achievement gap that seems to get larger theoretically due to diverse students. Diverse students are students in the United States who are usually from low socioeconomic families. This can be families of African American or Hispanic ancestry as well as non-native English speakers (Jackson, 2015). “Culturally responsive practice (CRP) entails understanding and using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of students from culturally diverse backgrounds to help them connect to and understand new content” (Gay, 2002, as cited in Linan-Thompson, Lara-Martinez, Cavazos, Spies, & Cheatham, 2018). These components are important when it comes to providing an equitable education for students.

Teachers can act as change agents when they incorporate lessons that regularly include different components of culture that students can better relate to. “Culturally and linguistically responsive practice is a multidimensional approach to teaching that affirms students’ cultural identities. Effective teachers integrate aspects of CLRP in all aspects of

their instruction from lesson planning to delivery of instruction” (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018, p. 8). There are four components to consider when thinking about incorporating culturally responsiveness within the classroom, instruction, language, social, and cultural knowledge (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018).

Sylvia Linan-Thompson and her colleagues suggest the following ways to incorporate culturally responsiveness in all four components.

- In instruction an easy way to affirm students’ identities is by giving culturally responsive feedback and questioning and selecting appropriate materials.
- When looking at language, it’s important to realize that many students are bilingual, and English may not be their first language.
- Instead of forcing students to do the work one way, allow them to use their linguistic resources to make learning meaningful. This not only encourages the student to learn in a way they are comfortable, but it also allows the teacher to create a stronger bond with the student.
- Socializing is a key component when it comes to relating to the students. Building authentic relationships with students is the responsibility of the teacher.
- Students need to feel that they can trust the teacher. When trust is evident, the student is more likely to feel comfortable and take risks.
- Building a sense of community by both the teachers and students can improve the academic outcomes of students from diverse backgrounds (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018).

“Cultural knowledge refers to the inclusion of content materials that provide a variety of perspectives and include the values, norms, and traditions of students from diverse backgrounds” (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018, p. 7). It is a teacher’s job to not only know the content of their lessons, but also know who the audience is to their content. Students are able to better understand and relate to the content when cultural bridges are created. “Gay (2000) believes that by acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritage of different ethnic groups both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum, students perceive the learning as having meaning in their lives” (Edwards, 2010, p. 11). Doing this helps students feel that they belong, are valued, and are heard. These positive results are what helps a student to be engaged in the lessons. Students also develop a positive experience with academics when they feel that they are included and celebrated.

One of the great things about culturally responsive strategies is the vast opportunities educators can use regularly without little preparation. The wide instructional strategies are connected to different learning styles. The different strategies allow work for the individual, partner, small-group, large group, and the class as a whole to be able to share their thoughts in a comfortable way, while also being able to feel supported. This allows for the teacher to be able to reach out and impact more students. Culturally responsive teaching also exposes students to learning about the different

cultures that their classmates identify with and allows students to acknowledge each other with a different level of understanding and respect.

Small Group Approaches

Many of the culturally responsive strategies include small-group components. There are many benefits to students, specifically at the middle school level, learning in a small group atmosphere. African-American students have been labeled to be global learners (Young, Wright, & Laster, 2005, p. 521). A global learner is one who needs to visualize what is about to be learned, as well as interact with what is about to be learned through movement and touch (Young et al., 2005, p. 521). According to Janice Hale-Benson, she recommends that teachers can best assist global learners by “creating learning activities that are energetic and lively” (as cited in Young et al., 2005, p. 521). She goes on to state that that African-American students are used to certain cultures in their lives. A culture at school is limited for African-American students (Young et al., 2005p. 521). At school African-American students are expected to sit down and receive instruction that is not stimulating enough. However, Young, Wright, & Laster have come up with a simple solution that can help make lessons more stimulating for global learners:

To assist the global learner in the classroom, the teacher could employ more group work, give students options of completing an assignment, and make correct grammar, a practice in the classroom. Most often, teachers want students to work individually, however, it would assist the global learner tremendously if that student can work with someone. It is important for the global learner to have

someone who will understand his or her need in learning, is patient with the learner, and is willing to assist the learner. As teachers, we know that sometimes students are able to explain information to another student in a way whereas the student can understand better (Young, Wright, & Laster, 2005, p. 522).

Small groups allow students to stimulate their brains as well as feel supported by their classmates in a way that students can't receive from a traditional approach to lessons.

Educating Teachers

There is a need for teachers to be educated on the current student demographics. Classrooms are no longer made up of mainly white students, so schools need to reevaluate their programs that are not effective in supporting all students. Our current society is continually changing, and yet, some teachers often resist the change. Some teachers often find themselves sticking to lessons that work for them and what they believe work for students in the classroom. However, are these lessons truly working for every student? Are teachers teaching the way they were taught? Are teachers teaching the way they learn best? Are teachers understanding the learning styles of their students? All of these questions are valuable things to consider when it comes to planning successful lessons that support all students.

It is important for teachers to understand their students, especially their students from different racial groups. Research discusses how African-American students are often times the group of students that are least supported in the classroom. There are many ways teachers can support African-American students with their achievement. The

first thing teachers need to do is truly get to know their students. Young, Wright, and Laster recommend that teachers prepare to instruct African-American students by approaching the students as if they are going to another country. Before going to that other country, one should learn about the culture of the people in that country. “There is a culture that children learn as African-American that teachers should learn about before preparing to instruct African-American children” (Young et al., 2005, p.522). When learning about the culture of a child, it is also important to know their learning style.

In the African-American community, the learning style that is most prevalent is a global learner as stated by Young, et al. When teachers are giving directions to global learners, the student is visualizing what needs to be accomplished. When a teacher has moved on, the learner is still visualizing what needs to occur. Often times teachers will hear the question of “what are we supposed to do?” In return, the teacher typically responds with “were you not listening?” In reality, the student is listening, but now has become fearful of asking the question again. In the article, “Instructing African American Students,” fear of asking the question can hurt the student’s academic progress more than a teacher may realize:

This fear of asking questions seems to live with the global learner throughout their educational career or they will have to find someone to help them progress through analytical subjects. Not only does this learner need to see, touch, and move when processing information, the global learner also responds to word pitch and feeling...Not getting the question answered may lead the student to believe that the teacher does not like him or her and chosen behavior may be indicative of

this thought. Even if the thought is not true, it is the perception of the student and consequently, the perception impacts learning (Young, Wright, and Laster, 2005, p. 519).

Teachers need to be aware of not only the strategies that they are incorporating within their lessons, but also their responses to their students during the lessons.

Educators need to make sure that they are creating connections that African-American students can compare and incorporate within their own experiences. Irvine discusses the importance when students have teachers that can create bonds and experiences that the students are able to relate to. "...if you can't make the linkages, you're not going to be a good teacher" (Irvine, 1999, p.31). Educators need to focus on building positive authentic relationships with students. This means being educated on the diversity that is our world and getting rid of disparities. "These disparities include teacher biases, perceptions, and attitudes as they relate to different ethnic and cultural groups. These biases, perceptions, and attitudes contribute significantly towards 'making or breaking' a diverse student's academic success" (Jackson, 2015, p. 3). That's why understanding the different levels of student culture, student biases, and our own biases is crucial to providing an equitable education. "Research further implies that teacher biases, perceptions, and attitudes definitely affect the achievement of diverse students, specifically with relation to race and socio-economic status" (Jackson, 2015, p. 9). Regardless of the demographics of the students, teachers need to support all students.

Summary

The achievement gap that schools are facing, particularly with African-American students, is a problem that has recently been exposed and questioned by many educators. Looking at our history, African-American students have always had to fight harder to have equal opportunities in life compared to their white counterparts. While some strides have been made to give equal opportunities in education, it seems that schools have not given the same focus to educational approaches that students, regardless of their demographics, can learn from. Classrooms are changing, and instead of celebrating the increased diversity that American schools are seeing in their students and providing culturally appropriate education for all groups, schools are failing to support these students by not offering them an equitable education. Instead, these students are often left behind, misunderstood, labelled as “problem children,” and often endure racism and discrimination in a place where they should feel most supported and safe. As the literature review presented in this chapter indicates, there is a need to change our practices in educational environments to support all students. In order to support all students, culturally responsive strategies need to be taught to educators and incorporated into the classrooms regularly.

Culturally responsive strategies first begin with understanding the culture of the student. Students identify with many different cultures, whether that is gender, race, or sexual orientation, teachers need to be educated on these different cultures. As mentioned earlier, middle school students are going through a developmental change in their lives.

Teachers need to be aware of how much a middle school student can cognitively process during this change in their lives and match their lessons to what students can handle. Besides understanding the developments that middle school students are enduring, it's also important that teachers understand the struggles that each culture regularly faces. Research summarized above suggests that African-American students are often times labelled as low academic, low poverty, and as contributors to the educational gap. These labels that are put on a demographic of students contributes to the stereotypes, racism, and bias these students endure regularly. It's important that teachers and students check their biases and understand the hardships that African-American students face regularly in their lives (Jackson, 2015).

Culturally responsive strategies can be approached in different ways. One of the most successful ways to increase engagement within our learners, particularly African-American students, is to allow them time to be with their peers (Young et al., 2005). As noted in my literature review, building lessons that support all cultures in the classroom allows for students in different demographics to build connections and relationships with each other. When students understand each other's culture, they build meaningful relationships. As a result, biases reduce along with prejudices. In order to have effective lessons, educators must first be trained in implementing culturally responsive strategies. Culturally responsive strategies are key factors to increase engagement within African-American students, thus possibly contributing to decreasing the spaces in the achievement gap.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Project Introduction

Students are entitled to an equitable education where they feel recognized and supported. Educators should have the proper training to help them know how to celebrate the diversity in their students. This project aims to educate staff on how to incorporate small-group culturally responsive strategies to increase engagement at the middle-school level in diverse students, specifically African-American students. This staff development project will teach educators a few different strategies that recognize the African American culture, as well as the teen culture to show ways to engage students by celebrating the rings of cultures within students within the classroom. These small group approaches to inclusiveness within students will hopefully encourage our African American students to be involved and engaged with their lessons once they feel supported in the classroom.

Chapter Overview

In chapter 2, existing literature on the topics of culturally responsive strategies, diversity in today's classroom, engagement in students, and the struggles of African-American students in school were discussed. All of these topics are key aspects to providing an equitable education to all students. Chapter Three provides an overview of the capstone project. The project consists of a staff development presentation that incorporates the necessity for CLR strategies within the classroom to support diverse populations. The goal is to give staff a few discussion, movement, and call and response

strategies that can increase the levels of engagement with students, particularly African American students. These strategies recognize the rings of culture within the students and support their culture when used effectively. Looking particularly at Dr. Sharroky Hollie's framework as well as AVID strategies, this presentation will allow staff to readily incorporate these culturally relevant strategies within any lesson. This chapter provides an overview of the presentation that is presented to staff for professional development.

Project Overview

Culturally responsive strategies are a common topic of conversation in education today because diversity is increasing in American schools. In a 2014 survey by the Department of Education, classrooms were projected to have the majority of the students no longer be white. This is a change from the common findings of schools being predominantly filled with white students. It is important to recognize and celebrate culture in classrooms in order to provide equal opportunities for all students. In Minnesota public schools, 34% of K-12 students are non-white, while teachers of color only make up 5% (Mahamud & Webster, 2018). Showing other educators how they can honor diversity in their classrooms by adapting their lessons to fit the needs of their students by incorporating culturally responsive strategies can increase levels of engagement.

The staff development provides strategies for educators to learn about a few small group strategies that have been proven successful when it comes to increasing levels of engagement in our African American students. Looking at Dr. Sharokky Hollie's Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching strategies, along with Advancement

Via Individual Determination (AVID) strategies, I chose the strategies that were proven most successful in increasing engagement within our African American student population. These strategies were first demonstrated in my own classroom and then showcased to staff showing how engagement levels increased in our African American students when used effectively. This list of strategies were broken down into three groups, call and response, discussion, and movement protocols. These strategies were handed out to staff in order for them to easily access these strategies to incorporate within their lessons.

Setting

The setting of this study is a public middle school in Minnesota. Currently, the overall enrollment grades K-12 is 3,186 students. There are 844 students in grades 5-8, enrolled in this school. The student to staff ratio is 17 to 1. This school's diversity in the student body has continued to increase throughout the years, a similar finding that is projected for many schools to acquire. In fact, this school ranks high in terms of diversity on educational charts. Currently, the demographics of students at this school are as follows: White: 314, Black/African-American: 294, Hispanic: 106, Asian: 63, Two or more races: 58, American Indian: 8, and Pacific Islander: 1. The minority enrollment at this school is 59%, a percentage higher in comparison to the Minnesota State average. This small-town atmosphere school is also an International Baccalaureate (IB) school. The amount of students that are on free and/or reduced lunch at this school is approximately 606 students or 71.8% of the total enrollment (Minnesota Department of Education). The students who attend this school come from a variety of households.

Many of the students do not live in the area, and instead are from surrounding cities that participate in the Northwest Suburban Integration District Program.

Intended Audience

The intended audience is educators who teach any student within our building from fifth to eighth grade. The overall goal with this audience is for teachers to increase culturally-responsive small-group strategies in their classrooms to provide an engaging and encouraging atmosphere for all students. While this presentation is designated, particularly to current teachers in the building, other staff can also use these strategies to build upon their relationships with students outside of the classroom atmosphere.

Timeline

Staff were already given this professional development in October. In order to make sure staff are using these strategies appropriately, there will be continuous discussions among staff as well as my observations of staff utilizing these strategies within their lessons. Within this project, I will coach 2-4 staff members and observe their use of these strategies within their lessons. By the end of February I will have observed the teachers I am coaching and reflect on their observations as well as my own. By the end of March I will create a list of the strategies that colleagues deemed most successful to increasing engagement levels within our African American students. This list will be sent out to the building showcasing strategies that can easily be incorporated within our classrooms to help increase the levels of engagement within the students.

Summary

This chapter introduced how schools are becoming more diverse and that all students are deserving of an equitable education. This project identifies how small-group culturally responsive strategies can help increase engagement in African-American students. The outline of my project, the intended audience, and the setting the project will take place are described. In the next chapter, I will reflect on the project as a whole. There will be communication with staff and a final discussion about the levels of engagement when small group culturally responsive strategies were utilized within the lessons.

The Project

The project was a professional development for my staff about Culturally Responsive Strategies. Throughout the presentation, strategies were incorporated that teachers could use within their classroom with different sized groups. The example task cards were given to staff for easy access to these strategies. These strategies come from Dr. Sharroky Hollie's *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning* book. This staff development was a continuation of staff already learning about Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching from previous years' staff development. The project ended up being two staff developments where another strategy was introduced to staff. Philosophical chairs is an AVID strategy taken from their curriculum. Staff were taught how to utilize this strategy into their classrooms for their content.

Attention Signals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hocus Pocus → Everybody focus • Chicka-Chicka → Boom boom • Lean with it → Rock with it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1, 2, 3 → Eyes on me • 4, 3, 2 → Eyes on you • Clap a pattern → Class mirrors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red Robin → Yum • Do your best and → Forget the rest • Ba da ba ba ba → I'm lovin it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All set → You bet • Let's get it started → In here • R.E.S.P.E.C.T → Find out what it means to me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's fun to stay at the YMCA • Mac and cheese Everybody freeze • If you can hear me clap: once...twice...etc.

Discussion Protocols



Graffiti Talk

- The teacher posts several questions or problems on paper around the room. When given an attention signal, students go to a chart of paper to write or draw their responses or solutions. Students do this silently or in quiet conversation. When all questions have been responded to, students sit down and the teacher leads the whole class in a discussion about the given answers from students.

Roll 'Em

- Four to six students are grouped and numbered. One die represents the group number. The other die represents the student's number. The teacher asks a question and tells students to think of their responses, while she or he rolls the dice. The teacher rolls and calls on the selected student, such as Group 3, Student 2. Continue to roll the dice until ample answers are heard or all questions answered.

Campfire Discussion


- Students are divided into groups of 4-5. Each group is given a topic, quote, or question based on the lesson's content. Each student writes an individual response to the prompt or question on a sticky note and places it around the "campfire" (a sheet of paper in the center of the group). Each student takes turns reading aloud a sticky note other than his or her own. Repeat until each sticky note has been read and discussed.

Numbered Heads Together

- The teacher divides students into groups of 4-6 and numbered. When asked a question, they work together to find the best answer. When called together again, the teacher rolls a number cube and asks the students from each group with the number rolled to stand. Each student then reports their group's answers.

Train/Pass It On

- Students call on one another to answer and/or ask questions. Students do not raise their hands, but are encouraged to call on a variety of people in the classroom. Students can also "pass" on a question by calling on another student for help or to answer. If students "pass," remind them that the question will come back to them. You can use an object to toss to students if desired.

<p style="text-align: center;">Movement</p> <p style="text-align: center;">  </p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Give One, Get One</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students stand up with their notes. They move around the room stopping to talk to 3-5 different people that they don't sit with regularly. They give an answer from the lesson and get an answer from a classmate from the lesson. No more than 1 minute should be shared with each pairing. This is a great review of the lesson for students.
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Snowballs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher posts review questions, problems, or prompts. Students answer the questions on a piece of paper without writing their names on the papers. When questions have been answered, students ball up their papers. The teacher counts to 3 and the students throw the papers to the front of the room. Students go and pick up a "snowball" other than their own. The teacher then uses a response protocol to share answers. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Musical Shares</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher asks a question or provides a prompt for students to respond to in writing. Explain that students will share their answers with several classmates. Turn on music. When the music starts, students begin to move or dance around the room. When the music stops, students find someone near them and share. Repeat the process until students share with 3-4 other students.
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Stop and Scribble</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher prepares an activity sheet with several questions, problems, or prompts and distributes one to each student. Students stand up and leave their papers on their desks. Play music. Students will walk around with a writing utensil. When the music stops, students sit in someone else's seat. They each choose a question on the paper to answer and write the answer down. The process continues until everyone's questions are answered on the sheet of paper. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Answer Chairs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desks/chairs are placed in one large circle or several small circles in the room. Students line up behind the chairs and walk around the chairs like musical chairs. The teacher asks a question from the lesson and then states an answer or definition. If the answer or definition the teacher reads is correct, students sit down. If the answer or definition is incorrect, they keep moving. *You can also remove a chair each round and students who are "out" can form review groups.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Introduction

When I started this Capstone Project journey, I was looking for more insight on how to better support and engage African American students within the classroom. With the demographics changing in many schools, educators needed to be prepared to teach to every student; not relying on the old curriculum that had been used for decades. I wanted to create resources for educators so that they can support their African-American students in the classroom. Particularly this project aimed to show *how culturally responsive small-group strategies can improve engagement in African-American students*.

Chapter Four, will reflect on what I observed and learned throughout the creation process of my capstone. During this chapter I will look at the research process, the staff development I presented, and then the aftermath of the presentation and how staff have evolved since the presentation. The first section will be my initial reflection on the project as a whole and the process of creating the project. The second section will focus on how the research from Chapter Two impacted my presentation and my procedures since beginning the project. The third section will focus on the presentation and the outcome of the presentation. The fourth section will begin to answer the question, where do we go from here? The fifth and final section will be a final summary of the overall capstone process and its impact within my own lessons and my school.

What I learned from the Capstone Project

Beginning this project I didn't know what I wanted to research. I knew I was in a time of my life where I wanted whatever I was researching to be something I could use in my own classroom. When I began to take my Master's classes two years ago, my district was just being trained by Dr. Sharroky Hollie. We were learning about Culturally Responsive strategies and that was my first eye opening moment where I truly saw inequalities within education, especially towards African-American students. I had heard about the need in providing opportunities for African-American students within the classroom, but I didn't realize how much biases can prevent this from occurring. When I learned that I would be creating a Capstone, I thought of Culturally Responsive Strategies and wondered if I could do something with that topic. I wanted to take what I was learning through my school, research more, and utilize the findings within my classroom.

During my research I learned more about how biases can hurt the overall success for students, specifically African American students. I learned how students that come from diverse backgrounds are usually set up for failure within the education system, instead of being set up for success. This can be reflected through the irrelevant curriculum, outdated practices, classroom management, and even the approaches to teaching curriculum. I learned how the education system has been scrutinized, specifically for the resources that are unavailable to diverse populations including African American students within the classroom. While writing this capstone, I realized how much I struggled with focusing my thoughts. Since there were so many resources available, I had to carefully read and choose which resources I wanted to incorporate

within this capstone that best reflected my voice and the message I wanted to convey.

The overall intent with this capstone was to make sure that this project could help other educators like myself learn how to incorporate strategies that supported the different cultures that students, particularly African American students, identified with.

Revisiting the Literature Review

All students deserve an equitable education that celebrates their cultures by incorporating relevant curriculum, providing support systems, and preventing biases from overtaking the approach of teaching. There was an abundance of research surrounding culturally responsiveness that has been written within the last decade. Geneva Gay's 2010 article, "Acting on beliefs in teacher education for cultural diversity," she discusses the cultural diversity that education encompasses today. Geneva Gay provides research showing how there is growth in diversity within classrooms. She continues to discuss that minorities need to be supported by educators in the schools, since a lot of these minorities are expected to conform to eurocentric norms. Dr. Hollie's, *Strategies for Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning*, is a good place to begin when looking for strategies to incorporate into lessons to support the different diverse populations. These strategies help support and celebrate the different rings of cultures our students identify with regularly. I used many of his strategies within my staff development to showcase to staff how to use these strategies in their lessons.

Moriah Balingit's article, "Racial disparities in school discipline are growing, federal data show," showed how there are discrepancies in terms of African Americans, especially African American males. In her article she demonstrates how African

Americans are more susceptible to getting referrals or arrests on school grounds. Many of the times this demographic is labeled incorrectly, and set up for failure within education. She goes on to enlighten the readers about how schools are not providing the correct support systems for this demographic. Since schools are becoming more diverse, it is very important to see these oppositions and learn how to avoid them.

Researching African American students within the education system proved to be an eye opening experience. Learning about the decades worth of discrepancies in minority students, especially African American students, showcased how education needs to change to support our current demographics. Research demonstrated how our curriculum as well as our teaching practices need to change in order to support our students. Teachers need more training in equity and inclusiveness in order to put their own biases aside in order to provide a supportive curriculum that celebrates the different cultures. I realized my district was on the right path to being culturally responsive, but that we needed more training. I wanted for new teachers to feel what I felt during the staff developments with Dr. Hollie. Our students deserve to be supported and understood in a way that is different from others. We needed to change and be better for our students, so that our students can be the best version of themselves.

Implications of the Project

After the first professional development, I knew that I needed more time to share different strategies that worked with our African American students. I then co-hosted another professional development that focused on teaching educators how to incorporate philosophical chairs into their lessons. This professional development displayed another

strategy that I have found my African American students are highly engaged with. Staff were then asked to incorporate philosophical chairs into their own lessons within the next week. This strategy was highly successful for my colleagues in terms of higher levels of engagement within their students, especially the African American students. I wanted to prepare more professional developments for my staff to try and incorporate other small-group strategies that resulted in higher levels of engagement for African American students. I realized there was more of a need for these professional developments and asked my Principal for another opportunity to present my findings to staff. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to do this due to the COVID-19.

Limitations of the Project

The first limitation to this project was the lack of time I had for my first professional development. In the first professional development, I had about 25 minutes to teach Dr. Hollie's strategies that I found worked well with my African American students. This was not enough time to truly showcase how these strategies worked and to teach staff how I can get buy in from all students when using these strategies. I knew that this project would not just be one professional development, but hopefully a series of a few. The second professional development was introducing and showcasing philosophical chairs to my colleagues. This class discussion strategy allows the freedom of voice with students when they are comfortable to talk. There are guidelines that teachers should follow when implementing this strategy in order to see successful results. However, I wanted to do another professional development that showcased more successful strategies for increasing levels of engagement for our African American

students. The next strategy I wanted to showcase was Grudgeball. Grudgeball is a review game that can be used in many different ways. It can help students review material before a test, or allows the teacher to see the levels of understanding on the current content. It is a competitive game that allows small groups to collaborate and work together to find the answers to a variety of questions. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 I wasn't able to present this professional development to my staff. This has been my biggest limitation. The lack of time to go in and observe my colleagues, as well as schools now being shut down due to the COVID-19.

Future Research

Culturally responsive strategies or culturally responsive teaching projects are going to be very similar to this project. All of the research goes back to being culturally responsive to our students. For future research and future researchers, looking at discrepancies within education to certain demographics of students is vital in understanding the why behind these strategies. Looking at culturally responsive teaching is another related area that describes the need for education to change for the current classroom. Looking at data about African American students in the classrooms is also another area that has critical information for understanding why education seems to be failing certain students. Based on my findings I would recommend that each teacher is trained on culturally responsive practices. I would recommend that educators are also informed on the discrepancies between the different demographics of students in our education system, especially African American students. I would also recommend that

educators research Dr. Hollie's techniques, as well as investigate AVID strategies to incorporate into the classroom.

Results

Since schools are currently shut down, I will have to wait to show my staff what I have learned and what strategies I have found most successful. I also know that my work isn't complete, since I wasn't able to try out more strategies that I wanted to try to see their success with levels of engagement for our African American students. Schools now being online will be another challenge as we go forward trying to see how we can maintain levels of engagement in all of our students. During this time, I can see what strategies can be manipulated into producing the same levels of engagement, just now online. I want to continue testing out different strategies and researching more unfamiliar strategies. Next school year I want to have a better understanding of strategies that were most successful and help share these findings with staff members in order to increase relationships between students and staff and create solutions to decreased engagement in our African American students.

Benefits

Education is evolving into more diverse demographics. Schools are coming under scrutiny when it comes to having resources to support these diverse populations. The curriculum and the approaches to the curriculum are changing each day to better support their students. This project can help educators know the why behind incorporating culturally responsive strategies, as well as some suggestions to begin with. Each educator needs to know the why before they can begin implementing these strategies. Once they

understand the need for culturally responsive strategies, then they can use this project to begin trying different strategies with their diverse populations of students. Schools need to support their diverse student demographics. They can do this by understanding the cultures, the biases, and the shortcomings our students face each day. Once understood, educators can begin taking the right steps forward to increasing engagement levels, particularly in their African American students, by supporting them with culturally responsive strategies.

Summary

Beginning this project, I wanted to see why there was less engagement with students, specifically African American students. Upon my own experiences, I realized how our own biases as teachers can impact the success of students. I wanted to investigate this revolution and see if other educators found the same thing. Upon my research I learned how there are even bigger discrepancies within our education systems; especially towards minority groups. During the research process, I learned how much disparities there were for African American students, especially males. I wanted to see what other researchers were saying was the best way to support minority students. Overall, it was an agreement of being culturally responsive. I knew that I wanted to share what I learned with my staff, in order to help provide support for our minority students in the classroom, specifically African American students.

I created a staff development that showcased some of the more successful culturally responsive strategies I have used within my own classroom to increase engagement levels within African American students. After the first staff development, I

realized that there was still a need to showcase different strategies for my staff. I created a second staff development to showcase a different discussion protocol that supported the rings of culture for students. From here, COVID-19 struck, and the continuation that I wanted for this project became stalled. From what I was able to do with the project, I would say that there was success in allowing teachers to utilize strategies that helped promote engagement in their African American students by being culturally responsive in their teachings. Going forward I want to help continue to educate staff on how to incorporate culturally responsive strategies into their lessons more regularly to support students of color, with the results of seeing more engagement within lessons.

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