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## Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Online Elementary Classroom

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Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Online Elementary Classroom

By

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....  | 5  |
| Introduction.....   | 5  |
| Personal Journey: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....                     | 6  |
| Personal Journey: Online Education.....                                 | 7  |
| Professional Significance.....  | 9  |
| Conclusion and Chapter Previews.....                                    | 11 |
| CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....                                     | 13 |
| Introduction.....   | 13 |
| Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....                                       | 14 |
| History and Current Understandings of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy..... | 15 |
| Neutrality of Classroom Culture.....                                    | 18 |
| Benefits of Utilizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....                 | 19 |
| Teacher Qualities and Pedagogical Approaches.....                       | 20 |
| Potential Pitfalls of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....                 | 23 |
| Enacting CRP in the Classroom.....                                      | 24 |
| Best Practices in Online Learning.....                                  | 28 |
| History of Distance Learning.....                                       | 29 |
| COVID-19 and Beyond.....  | 30 |
| Best Practices in an Online Learning Environment.....                   | 31 |
| Benefits and Challenges of Online Learning.....                         | 36 |
| Differing Perspectives on the Efficacy of Online Instruction.....       | 41 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Effective Implementation of CRP in a Digital Learning Environment..... | 42 |
| Centering Equity.....  | 43 |
| Student-Driven Pedagogy for Maximizing Student Engagement.....         | 45 |
| Community.....   | 46 |
| The Role of Culture in Learning.....                                   | 47 |
| Concluding Thoughts.....   | 48 |
| CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....                                | 50 |
| Introduction.....  | 50 |
| Project Rationale.....   | 50 |
| Description of Project.....  | 51 |
| Framework.....   | 52 |
| Setting and Audience.....  | 53 |
| Assessment.....  | 54 |
| Timeline.....  | 54 |
| Conclusion.....  | 54 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: Reflection.....  | 55 |
| Introduction.....  | 55 |
| Major Learnings.....   | 55 |
| Revisiting the Literature Review.....                                  | 57 |
| Literature Review on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....                 | 57 |
| Literature Review on Best Practices in Online Learning.....            | 58 |
| Finding Unifying Themes from Both Literature Reviews.....              | 58 |
| Project Reflection.....  | 59 |

Limitations.....60

Future Research Direction.....60

Benefit to the Profession.....61

Plans for Dissemination.....61

Conclusion.....61

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Schools around the world were tasked with an unprecedented challenge in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many schools having to shift to online learning within days or weeks. While many originally equated online learning with “emergency learning,” it has become increasingly apparent that online learning is here to stay. Digital learning is being implemented around the country for the 2021-22 school year, with options in many districts for K-12 students to enroll. While online learning has been commonplace for many years at the university level (Kentnor, 2015), best practices for online teaching at the elementary level are yet to be fully established . When school programming is being developed, it is critical to be conscientious of student demographics, including the unique strengths and cultural and linguistic assets that they bring into the classroom.

Equity has become a focus for many schools and districts around the country and must continue to be a central focus for online learning communities as well. Culturally relevant pedagogy, a critical component of ensuring equity, contributes to creating a safe, nurturing, and supportive learning environment for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Whether students are in school or online, every child should have the opportunity to receive a culturally relevant and sustaining education. My research aims to bridge the gap between best practices in online teaching and learning with those of culturally relevant pedagogy. The research question I will pursue is, *How can online elementary school teachers incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into best practices for digital learning?*

Throughout chapter one, my personal journey toward online teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy will be explored. Furthermore, the relevance and significance of my research question to the profession will be established. In the subsequent chapter, I will review the existing literature on best practices of online teaching and learning, as well as culturally relevant pedagogy at the elementary level.

### **Personal Journey: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

As early as middle school, I became strongly interested in social justice topics and initiatives. By high school, I had joined the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) club as an ally. Although I had some basic understanding of LGBTQ+ issues, I had not priorly met LGBTQ+ -identifying people. Through my engagement in this club, I was able to gain understanding and appreciation for the challenges this community faces. My participation in this group set the groundwork for later activism during the “Vote No” campaign, a 2012 Minnesota campaign to oppose a constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage (Gilbert et al., 2012) . Later, as an undergraduate student, I signed up for a Social Justice Retreat: a weekend retreat with a diverse group of students from all different walks of life. We shared stories, learned from each other, and grew in our leadership to stand up for the rights of all marginalized people. From each of these experiences and more, I learned more about the systemic injustices which exist in our society. I began to see my privileged upbringing, and learned about the importance of allyship, including listening, taking action, and working for systemic change.

In 2013, during my senior year at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, I worked with my Social Justice in Education professor to design and implement qualitative research based upon Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995) culturally relevant

pedagogy. My aim was to research how prepared undergraduate UW-River Falls students felt about entering into increasingly diverse school communities. Through this work, I conducted a literature review and gained more understanding of how to implement equitable learning practices. I was accepted to present my findings at the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) conference in San Francisco, California, where I also attended seminars about leading research in the multicultural field. This conference fueled a long-lasting professional interest and commitment to social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy.

As I entered the teaching profession in 2014, my commitment to social justice and equity continued to grow. I sought additional learning opportunities, including conferences, readings, and conversations- both formal and informal. I was compelled to maintain an asset-based mindset of my students, including acknowledging and honoring their unique cultural and linguistic attributes. As education continues to evolve and change, I strive to be at the forefront of creating equitable, engaging, and inclusive learning experiences for all students.

### **Personal Journey: Online Education**

From 2014-2020, the first six years of my teaching career, I utilized technology in my teaching, including the use of Kahoot!, FlipGrid, and Google Suite. However, at the schools where I taught, we did not have a 1:1 initiative at the elementary level, meaning that there was not one device available for each student. Therefore, the use of technological innovation in the classroom was limited.

In March 2020, students around the world were forced into a sudden shift to online learning platforms. Teachers, students, and parents alike were asked to learn new



systems, navigate online meeting platforms, and become self-sufficient in managing independent work and deadlines. I was teaching at a German-American school in Berlin, Germany at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite what some might assume, technology utilization in schools is not commonplace in Germany. My school building had only recently received WiFi, and only fifth and sixth graders had access to a rotating Chromebook cart. With this limited access to technology, some students and teachers struggled to adapt to this new mode of digital emergency learning.

For the 2021-22 school year, I moved back to the United States, and began a sixth grade teaching position at a Twin Cities suburban middle school. At this school, there was a 1:1 iPad initiative, and students had utilized learning management systems such as Schoology and Seesaw for many years prior. With the unpredictable shifts between hybrid, distance, and in-person learning, the recommendation was to approach all learning as distance learning. This meant that Schoology, videos, online access to readings, and all assignments had to be online-accessible, with very little reliance on paper. The abrupt change to online-based learning pushed students and teachers to accelerate their proficiency in learning technologies, which will likely shape the trajectory of education for years to come (Schwartz et al., 2020).

With the opening of new digital academies, it is clear that many districts, families, and students intend to pursue online learning into the future. After seven years of combined elementary and middle school teaching experience, I face the unique challenge of being part of my district's first-ever online school for the 2021-22 school year. While the past year and a half has been great experiential learning in technology and online learning, there is still much to learn about best practices for online learning at the

elementary level. As I approach this new position, I seek to understand how to design engaging and equitable online learning opportunities rooted in culturally relevant practices.

### **Professional Significance**

It is a pivotal time for equity, social justice, and cultural responsiveness in our country. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN, communities are engaging in discussions on how to dismantle inequitable practices, including looking at systems and the impacts on marginalized communities. Many districts have renewed commitments to equitable practices to the praise and chagrin of community members.

Meanwhile, the diversity of communities and schools across the country is steadily growing. In 2000, white students made up the majority of K-12 public school students. Now, two decades later, white students are in the minority at 47% of publicly enrolled students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the most growth among enrolled students is of Hispanic and mixed race racial backgrounds. While this data points to an increasingly diverse U.S. population, there remains a pervasive issue of achievement and opportunity gaps among racial lines (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Dorn et al., 2021).

The use of brick and mortar is not the only major difference between physical and digital classrooms. Student populations enrolled in online learning during the 2020-21 school year suggest that there is a disproportionate amount of students of color in online learning compared to their white K-12 peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). From January through April 2021, an average of 21% of white students were enrolled in remote learning throughout the country. When looking at national data for Black, Asian, and

Hispanic students, they were enrolled in remote learning during that same time frame at respective rates of 49%, 63%, and 48% (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Looking at my district's data for the 2021-22 school year digital academy enrollment, the trends of disproportionate numbers of students of color emerges as well. This is all the more reason that best practices for culturally relevant instruction and online learning must urgently be established.

While there is a societal need for systemic change, there are steps that schools can take to ensure equitable access to education for all students. One such approach is the use of culturally relevant pedagogical strategies in the classroom and curriculum design. Culturally relevant pedagogy is a theoretical model developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014). This model emphasizes “multiple aspects of student achievement and supports to uphold their cultural identities (California Department of Education, 2020).” Additionally, students are encouraged to take agency in identifying and critiquing social inequities (California Department of Education, 2020). This approach is relationship-centered, affirming, and asset-based; furthermore, it empowers students to take action for positive change in their communities.

By placing students at the center of learning and embracing the unique cultural, racial, and linguistic strengths and backgrounds they bring into the classroom, teachers can better support student learning. Students want to see themselves in the curriculum; by using culturally relevant texts, approaches, and curricula in the classroom, teachers can engage students to a higher degree (Feger, 2006). Domina et al. (2021) explain, “engagement is typically a first step toward other favorable academic outcomes.” When

teachers are engaging students at higher rates, all stakeholders benefit, especially student learning.

With an increase in closure of physical buildings during the pandemic and the demand for more online instruction, rigorous and culturally responsive teaching in an online environment is important to master. Since many schools are maintaining a digital program into the future, it is critical that best practices, including accommodations, differentiation, and cultural responsiveness, are understood and implemented. Strategies and supports must be modified to ensure engagement and success in learning. It could also be argued that online learning presents opportunities not typically present in a physical classroom environment. One goal of my research is to discover best practices for online instruction grounded in culturally relevant teaching strategies.

### **Conclusion and Chapter Previews**

Chapter one introduces my research question, *How can online elementary school teachers incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into best practices for digital learning?*, and establishes the significance and relevance of this question to the profession. The case for culturally relevant pedagogy in online learning was made, as data shows a disproportionate amount of students of color enrolled in online learning platforms. The success of my online learning students next school year is critical to me, and my research will help to inform my curriculum design, classroom management techniques, and other pedagogical approaches.

In chapter two, I will detail the existing research around culturally relevant pedagogy and online learning. In the last section of the literature review, I will synthesize common themes that emerge from culturally relevant pedagogy and online learning. In

chapter three, I will outline my professional development plan, which synthesizes the research on culturally relevant pedagogy and online teaching and learning into best practices for online learning. This will consist of three sequential professional development sessions for online elementary teachers. In chapter four, I will present the professional development plan and materials, as well as further reflect on the findings for my research topic.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

My capstone seeks to answer the research question, *How can online elementary school teachers incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into best practices for digital learning?* In order to investigate this question thoroughly, three themes were determined. First, it is important to understand the established best practices of culturally relevant pedagogy, including the benefits to students and teachers. Second, the relevance of online education in today's society must be established, including what is known about best practices in the field. Third, common themes from best practices in culturally relevant pedagogy and online learning will be identified, including recommendations for fully integrating culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) into an online learning environment.

In order to investigate this question, an understanding of CRP must be established. The history of CRP, its tenets, and theories that build upon CRP will be introduced. The use of CRP practices are an important aspect of developing a safe, affirming, and culturally responsive classroom environment. When students feel that they are reflected in the social and academic community, they are more likely to be engaged learners. This chapter will describe research-based benefits of CRP integration in classroom communities. Furthermore, established best practices, strategies, and mindsets will be discussed. It is critical that CRP is used in all teaching settings, including in online learning communities.

Chapter two also explores the history of online learning, including the relatively recent spike of student enrollment in online learning communities. Research suggests the

recent spike in online learning due to the 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic is not a temporary shift (Schwartz et al., 2020). With this increased demand in K-12 online learning comes the responsibility of educators to understand best practices for engaging students in a rigorous and culturally relevant learning environment. My research aims to understand best practices that are relevant to elementary-aged students. This section will also explore the obstacles and opportunities that online learning can present for teachers and students.

Tying together CRP and online learning best practices, the next section will explore common themes emerging from the research. Online learning without a CRP lens will fall short of the academic, social, and emotional goals of creating a safe and inclusive space for student learning. By understanding how CRP can be integrated successfully into an online classroom, all stakeholders— parents, students, teachers, the community, and educational institutions— will benefit.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) coined the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP), a theory which aims to bolster the academic and cultural proficiency of students, while encouraging students to identify and disrupt inequity in their communities. In more recent years, academics have pushed for a greater focus on culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which builds upon similar tenets of CRP but underlines the importance of sustaining students' linguistic and cultural heritage. This approach aims to foster the cultural richness and strengths of students who have historically been made invisible in schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). Throughout this chapter, the terms *culturally relevant pedagogy*, *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, and *culturally responsive teaching* will be

used interchangeably to mean the centering of instruction around the cultural and linguistic strengths that students bring into the classroom.

An additional component in this definition will be to engage students in discussions and action around social justice in their communities. Teachers who strive to use culturally relevant practices intentionally create a curriculum that is both culturally relevant, interesting, and accessible to students, while creating space for student voice and perspective in the classroom. When educators successfully create a safe and inviting classroom community, students have greater success and higher levels of engagement (Abacoiglu et al., 2020). In this section, a history of CRP will be explored, as well as applicable definitions of important terms. Further, teacher qualities and strategies that lend themselves to effective implementation of CRP will be explored. The importance of CRP will be established, including the benefits to *all* children when it is successfully implemented in classroom communities. Finally, there will be an overview of best practices, including actionable steps teachers can take to implement CRP in their classrooms.

### ***History and Current Understandings of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy***

After noticing deficit paradigms in the literature centered around African American students, Ladson-Billings (1995) set out to define her own theory. She began by identifying and observing eight master teachers who were considered by families, administration, and standardized test scores to be expert teachers of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As a culmination of this research, she coined the theory Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). CRP is multifaceted, and each of its three tenets play an important role in fostering a learning environment where all students can achieve,



especially those who have historically been marginalized. One of these tenets is the pursuit of academic success for all students. In a standards-based era, it is easy to equate student success with high standardized test scores. Although Ladson-Billings (1995) understands the importance of demonstrating achievement on standardized assessments, the focus is not solely on test scores as the primary marker of success. Teachers can look to various other markers to determine student growth and achievement over time, such as engagement, informal teacher-made assessments, and student affect.

In addition to academic success, CRP aims to help students maintain cultural integrity and demonstrate cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers can support this development by affirming students' cultural identities, values, and linguistic strengths. Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2014) intended for students to learn about other cultures as well. Finally, CRP encourages students to develop "sociopolitical consciousness," or an understanding of inequities and how they operate amongst various systems and institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 483). With this understanding comes action, especially as it relates to the students' interests in creating impact in their communities. When teachers operationalize CRP in their classrooms, they are empowering students to make change within their communities. In Ladson-Billings' (1995) research, she discovered one of the classrooms created a proposal for city council to better utilize vacant community spaces. Students were engaged in meaningful dialogue and created actionable steps, which led to change in their communities. This classroom's example of civic action demonstrates the possibilities for students to engage in social justice initiatives that matter to them and benefit their communities.

Since the conception of CRP as an educational theory, its meanings and uses have been interpreted in a variety of ways (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In some cases, the use of CRP has been reduced to surface-level and shallow cultural celebrations, ignoring a more nuanced version of culture and excluding the sociopolitical action component of CRP. In other cases, CRP was used as the foundation and building block for constructing more modern and progressive theories. One such case is the development of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), a theory that builds upon similar tenets of CRP, but pushes it to consider the revitalization and sustainability efforts of historically marginalized communities (Paris & Alim, 2017). CSP is defined as, “an approach that seeks to perpetuate and foster — to sustain — linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Paris, 2012, p. 1). A differentiating factor between Ladson-Billings’ (1995) CRP and Paris and Alim’s (2017) CSP is that the latter recognizes the fluid and complex nature of culture and identities in our globalized and ever-changing world (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Furthermore, it sees these unique identities as assets to the community and to student learning. Another essential difference is the emphasis on *sustaining*, or -in the case of many Indigenous populations- *revitalizing* students’ native cultural and linguistic identities. Ladson-Billings supports this forward motion of scholarship and how CSP builds upon and advances her original theory of academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In the previous paragraphs, the meanings of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) were defined. There are two additional terms that warrant explanation: *culture* and *social justice*. Throughout this chapter, the term

‘culture’ will be used often. For the purposes of this capstone, culture will be defined as common racial, ethnic, linguistic, generational, and religious identities, which often result in shared beliefs, values, and perspectives. This definition of culture is dynamic and leaves room for fluidity and change (Gay, 2002; Gorski, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Additionally, the term ‘social justice’ will be defined as working toward a just, equitable society, including disrupting inequitable systems, institutions, and practices, while seeking equitable opportunities for all.

### ***Neutrality of Classroom Culture***

Neutrality does not exist in schools, as much as educators and administration might wish it does (Lyiscott, 2019). Lyiscott (2019) warns of the danger of believing in “neutrality,” whereby people of color are often seen as ‘other’ or worse. She points out that students often undergo cultural and linguistic erasure in the process of students navigating systemic oppression to come out on the other side of “success” (Lyiscott, 2019). It is important for educators to recognize that curriculum, classroom expectations, and classroom communication styles all have cultural underpinnings, which can lead to a cultural mismatch between students and school. Gay (2002; 2013) recommends to *multiculturalize* our pedagogy; in other words, we should be selecting learning experiences, pedagogical approaches, and content that match the diverse set of learners in our classrooms (Gay, 2002). Educators must be ready to adapt to the unique set of learners in the classroom, while ensuring relevant and representative curricula. This is important not only for diverse classrooms, but homogeneous classrooms alike.

### ***Benefits of Utilizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy***

The utilization of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) in the classroom increases student engagement and academic success (Abacoiglu et al., 2020; Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Abacioglu et al. (2020) point out various studies which demonstrate that utilizing culturally relevant teaching strategies results in increased active learning. When teachers intentionally incorporate relevant learning experiences into the classroom curricula, students can make greater connections between the curriculum and their life experiences. In one study, a teacher of Caribbean and Central and South American migrants found that by engaging students in texts that dealt with familiar life experiences and relatable characters, students demonstrated a considerable increase in engagement and critical thinking skills (Feger, 2006).

Aragona-Young & Sawyer (2018) indicate that although many teachers in their study prioritized creating a welcoming and positive classroom atmosphere for students, many did not have an understanding of how to carry this forward with a lens for equity and multiculturalism. When equity and inclusion is centered in the classroom, teachers become more responsive to their students. As a result, student engagement increases, leading to greater student success (Abacioglu et al., 2020). Aside from greater engagement and academic success, the utilization of CRP can also increase students' development of social skills and lay the groundwork for participation in a globalized, diverse society (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018).

### *Teacher Qualities and Pedagogical Approaches*

**Common Themes.** In Ladson-Billings' (1995) study of eight expert teachers, each educator displayed different classroom management styles, pedagogical approaches, and diverse personality traits. In order to find the common denominator for what made these teachers so effective, two years of observational research was conducted (Ladson-Billings, 1995). What Ladson-Billings (1995) discovered were common themes of empathy, care, and a desire to break down barriers for historically marginalized students and the community. Each teacher shared a commitment to dismantling unjust social structures as part of their drive to be an effective teacher. Furthermore, these teachers wanted to equip their students with the tools and resources to confront inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Gay (2002) also identified *caring* as a fundamental component of teachers enacting CRP in their classrooms. Gay states, "Caring is a moral imperative, a social responsibility, and a pedagogical necessity" (Gay, 2002, p. 109). Gay (2002) goes on to further explain that the concept of caring is not simply to be a nurturing presence in students' lives, but to act in the best interest of students, hold high expectations, and stop at nothing to ensure opportunities and access to academic success. Gay's (2002) approach is similar to Ladson-Billings' (1995) in that they both rely on the starting point of cultural and linguistic affirmation. In other words, educators must believe in the wholeness of students as they are and validate the cultural and linguistic gifts they bring into the classroom. These shared ideological underpinnings of caring, empathy, and a commitment to social justice are what constitute necessary ingredients for enacting CRP.

**Understanding Student Background and Cultural Identities.** Gaining a deeper understanding of students is another important step to effectively enacting CRP in schools. While culture is ever-changing and fluid, there are patterns and themes that emerge from various cultural groups (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Abacioglu et al. (2020) discuss the importance of learning about student values, beliefs, identities, and lived realities. They suggest creating space for authentic dialogue, written reflections, and strengthening teacher-family relationships as a possible means for learning more about the unique cultural identities of students (Abacioglu et al., 2020). A safe classroom community should be established that encourages students to feel comfortable sharing parts of their complex identities. For example, some teachers are beginning to ask for student pronouns at the beginning of the school year in order to support student identity and communicate that all identities will be respected and honored in their classroom. When teachers explicitly and implicitly support students' cultural identities, as well as build a knowledge base of their students as individuals, they can better support meaningful student learning opportunities (Gay, 2000, 2002, as cited in Abacioglu et al., 2020).

Gay (2002) argues that teachers are not sufficiently prepared to teach in racially and linguistically diverse classrooms. How can teachers represent students in various subjects if they lack a knowledge base of diverse authors, scientists, mathematicians, artists, and inventors? How can teachers connect learning to student experiences, values, and beliefs if they lack an understanding of anything beyond surface-level cultural knowledge? If teachers are unaware of the realities of social prejudice and systemic barriers, how can they ever expect to challenge systemic or classroom-level inequities? In

order to address this gap, Abacioglu et al. (2020) state that teachers should be immersed in cultural contexts that are different from their own. Through this participation, teachers will gain invaluable knowledge, perspective, and appreciation for cultural diversity that they could not otherwise ascertain. Furthermore, the authors posit that this development of awareness will not only benefit students from whom the teachers are culturally different, but also generally increase the teachers' sensitivity to all students (Abacioglu et al., 2020). Gorski (2016) similarly contends that in order for teachers to effectively advocate for policies and generate solutions to inequitable systems, teachers must first develop a strong understanding of current social and systemic barriers.

**Teacher Attitudes.** An asset-based approach is essential when enacting CRP. Teachers must hold dear the notion that students come in as valuable and intelligent members of the classroom community- just as they are (Gay, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1995) lists components of teacher attitudes that support CRP. Some of these include: believing in the academic ability of all students; engaging in the classroom community as an equal member; and believing themselves to be facilitators of learning, not the sole source of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Part of an educator's work is to understand the biases, assumptions, and conscious or unconscious prejudices they bring with them to the classroom (Nieto, 2004, as cited in Abacioglu et al., 2020). Without this reflection, teachers will not be equipped to critically examine their own practice and pedagogy for signs of bias. Gay (2002) gives an example of students that are accustomed to communal communication styles. These communication styles may involve overlapping, active participation from the "listeners," and call-and-response. While this is a natural way for some students to demonstrate

engagement and knowledge, if teachers take a deficit view of this participation style, students will be seen as unruly, disrespectful, or rude. Over time, the educational system will dim the light of these students, resulting in a loss of opportunity for authentic learning.

Although many theories exist which work to help students assimilate to mainstream norms, culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy takes a decidedly different stance (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is key for culturally responsive teachers to believe that students do not need to change themselves or ‘fit the mold’ to succeed in school. Educators need to harness the power of diversity in student strengths, learning styles, communication styles, and background knowledge. School culture operates on a spoken and unspoken set of ‘rules’ or ‘hidden curriculum’ (Alsubaie, 2015). Oftentimes, for the most marginalized groups, these rules and norms of traditional school culture can obstruct the goal of effective teaching and successful learning. Lyiscott (2019) encourages all teachers to interrogate where their ideas of excellence come from. Furthermore, *why* are these the standards for excellence? Can and should they be expanded, revised, or omitted?

### ***Potential Pitfalls of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy***

Ladson-Billings (2014) posits that once a theory is mainstream, it can take on a life of its own, despite how different it is from the original intention. Although she acknowledges good intentions, she also points out the danger in watering down a theory to a point where it is no longer achieving what it sets out to accomplish. It is important to understand the various pitfalls or teaching traps that can occur if the essential tenets of CRP are not understood or fully enacted.



**Celebration of diversity.** A common pitfall in attempting to enact CRP is the phenomenon of “celebrating diversity” as the go-to initiative. While the motivation behind these efforts is often pure, the intent does not match the impact- or lack of impact. Oftentimes, in lieu of dealing head-on with racial, social, and cultural inequities, educators will make curricular choices that focus solely on the celebration of diversity in an effort to avoid uncomfortable conversations (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018). Aragona-Young and Sawyer (2018) refer to this trap as *tourist multiculturalism*. With a tourist approach, students are given surface-level glimpses into a culture’s food, dress, or holidays. At best, students may learn a few fun facts or enjoy a “culturally exotic” food. At worst, this tourist approach may sustain superficial understandings of culture and even perpetuate harmful stereotypes (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018; Gorski, 2016). Although it is far easier to celebrate diversity than to stand up against systemic inequity in schools, teachers must advocate for equitable student outcomes, policies, and practices (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018).

**Emphasizing culture over equity.** The overemphasis of culture can get in the way of the true goals of CRP: centering equity in teaching and education systems. Gorski (2016) calls on educators to distinguish between cultural initiatives and those initiatives that are truly centered around equity. Gorski (2016) contends that a sole focus on students’ cultural mismatch with schools can place blame on students and shift responsibility away from the troublesome systems at play in educational institutions. Without a focus on creating equitable systems, students will continue to be marginalized in schools.

**White Students and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.** The discussion of CRP in schools often focuses on the benefits to students of color or Indigenous populations. Some may be led to believe that a class of all or majority-white students have no need to engage in CRP principles (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018). However, students of color are not the only beneficiaries of CRP practices. Gorski (2015) points out that white, non-Hispanic students may face the biggest hurdles in learning about bias, discrimination, and social inequities. By asking students- yes, even white students- to delve into the social inequities, discuss school practices that contribute to advantages and disadvantages for certain students, and think about actionable steps they can take to make change, they are better equipped to recognize systemic privilege and discrimination in their daily lives (Gorski, 2015). Gay (2002) similarly states that, “Culturally responsive teachers help students to understand that knowledge has moral and political elements and consequences, which obligate them to take social action to promote freedom, equality, and justice for everyone” (p. 110). Furthermore, part of Ladson-Billings’ (1995) essential three tenets requires students to become culturally competent in at least one other culture from their own, which CRP will help facilitate.

### ***Enacting CRP in the Classroom***

**Celebrating Linguistic and Cultural Diversity.** It has been established that overly simplistic and superficial celebrations of diversity can reinforce stereotypes and the illusion of progress where there is otherwise none to be found. Gorski (2016) contends that the idea of ‘celebrating linguistic and cultural diversity’ can, similar to CRP, be watered down to mean essentially nothing. He asks educators to consider if using this phrase is a covert way of comparing students of color against a white, middle class

norm? These are considerations that must be taken into account. However, the celebration of linguistic and cultural diversity is nothing to shy away from. Lyiscott (2019) states that, “classrooms that seek to sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism are at once sites of “linguistic celebration”” (p. 40). By creating space to flip the narrative, linguistically and racially marginalized groups will gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the strength of diversity.

**CRP and the Classroom Community.** It is imperative that educators work to form a community that is inclusive, rigorous, and relevant to ethnically and linguistically diverse students (Gay, 2002). One essential component is creating a classroom community that demonstrates cooperation, respect, and honors all individuals. Many students, especially students of color, grow up valuing the importance of community well-being above individual success. In Ladson-Billings’ (1995) study of expert teachers, she found that all of the eight teachers fostered a community built on group success over individual achievement and pursuits. Observers of these classrooms would see collaboration, cooperative learning, and students in the roles of both teachers and learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Furthermore, students in culturally responsive classrooms also show respect for each other’s differences and diversity of communication styles, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences.

**CRP and Curricular Choices.** Many teachers know the realities of district-mandated curriculum and standards-driven materials. When teachers *are* given the freedom to create their own curriculum, they may not have the time, expertise, or budget to build a curriculum that can be truly centered around their unique set of learners. More often than not, states, districts, or schools mandate what must be taught, sometimes

how it should be taught, and when the instruction should be delivered by (Kidwell & Penton Herrera, 2019). With this grip over teacher autonomy, what are teachers to do in integrating the tenets of CRP into the curricula?

By utilizing a culturally responsive lens, teachers can still find creative ways to meet the needs of their students. Kidwell & Penton Herrera (2019) illustrate an example of a teacher who was struggling to connect the mandated curriculum to a student who had recently migrated from Guatemala. By building a relationship with this student, the teacher was able to learn that this student enjoyed nature above all else. In order to pique this student's interest and connect to his preferred naturalistic learning environment, the teacher incorporated outdoor activities into the learning experiences. By pivoting in this direction, the teacher demonstrated an ability to work within the given curriculum while finding creative ways to engage the students.

In situations where teachers do have some level of autonomy, Gay (2002) recommends a thorough analysis of the curriculum. Educators can look at a curriculum's "...variety, significance, and authenticity of narrative texts, visual illustrations, learning activities, role models, and authorial sources used in the instruction material" (Gay, 2002, p. 108). Furthermore, Gay (2002) promotes clearly contextualizing issues (e.g. impacts of race or socioeconomics), incorporating various types of knowledge, and the incorporation of multiple perspectives into the curriculum. Ladson-Billings (2014) encourages educators to build in opportunities for students to critically examine policies and systems that affect the community. Whether it is a conversation around school uniforms or gun violence, students are engaged when they can discuss and examine meaningful issues that are meaningful to their lives.

The formal curriculum is not the only place where students can learn and receive messaging in the classroom. Utilizing wall space around the classroom or school building is another way that teachers can intentionally enact culturally sustaining and relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2002). Including symbols and images of diversity, modeling inclusive language, and possibly even incorporating students' home language into the landscape are all ways that classroom environments can support the value of multiculturalism.

As important as best practices in culturally responsive teaching are, it is also critically important that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and supports to put in place best practices for online teaching and learning as well.

### **Best Practices in Online Learning**

In 2020, students, teachers, and parents around the world were tasked with hastily adapting to online learning platforms due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic (Domina et al., 2021). While online learning has been commonplace in higher education for some time, there is still much to be learned about best practices of online teaching at the elementary level. In this section, a brief overview will be given regarding the history of online education, leading up to the most recent years of expanded online learning implementation in the wake of the 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic. It has become more apparent that online learning is here to stay (Schwartz et al., 2020). With the continued demand for online education, it is critical to gain a greater understanding of best practices at the elementary level. Secondly, this section will give an overview of best practices in online learning and teaching. Common themes for best practices include multimodal student engagement strategies, clear expectations for students and families, and innovative tools such as virtual field trips and the gamification of learning (Delacruz,

2019). Lastly, this section will explore the benefits and challenges of online learning, including differing perspectives from researchers in the field of education.

### ***History of Distance Learning***

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the last time that schools in the United States were forced to close at such a large scale was in 1918 during the height of the Spanish Flu pandemic (Morgan, 2020). Although this took place before the internet age, students were still navigating learning at a distance.

With the creation of correspondence courses in the late 1800s, to the development of educational television and radio programming in the 1900s, there are over a century of distance-education models to learn from (Perry & Pilati, 2011). Furthermore, with the adoption of the Internet widely used in the late 1990s, online learning started to come into view. Former correspondence courses began to shift to the use of internet-based educational programming as early as the mid-1990s (Archambault, 2018). Additionally, some future-thinking private and public schools began to create new online programming in the same decade. With the technological advancements of the 2000's, educators are now in a position to be able to pull from multiple platforms, sources, tools, and modes of learning in the development of their online curriculum.

Throughout this section, 'virtual learning,' 'online learning,' and 'distance learning' are terms that will be used interchangeably to indicate learning that is taking place with the use of technology when students are outside of the physical classroom. Often, this is done when students are learning in their homes for the school year while educators are meeting with students through web-based meeting platforms such as Zoom, Google Meets, or Webex. Just like in a physical classroom, successful mastery of

coursework and attendance will result in promotion to the next grade level (Beck & Beasley, 2021). Even in pre-pandemic times, there was an increase in online enrollment from 50% to 74%, with the most substantial increase seen in rural communities (Gemin & Pape, 2017, as cited in Beck & Beasley, 2021). As the next paragraph will discuss, this trend is growing from 2021 and beyond.

### ***COVID-19 and Beyond***

In March 2020, rising cases of COVID-19 compelled schools around the United States to close their doors (Lepp et al., 2021). As a result, teachers and administrators around the country were tasked with quickly navigating how to implement emergency distance learning for their students. This sudden shift proved to be a challenge for students, teachers, and caregivers alike (Lepp et al., 2021). While many classrooms turned to digital learning platforms such as Schoology, Seesaw, and Google Classroom to deliver instruction, there were still many students who, for various reasons, never logged on.

As schools began to look toward the 2020-21 school year, various plans took shape in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While some schools opted to go fully in-person as normal, others chose hybrid models and fully distance models. Some school districts allowed for parents to make the choice between the in-person or hybrid models and separate digital classrooms. Although it is clear that the main motivations for these varying models in the 2020-21 school year was safety and logistics (i.e. substitute teacher shortages, lack of medically-able teachers, etc.), this does not mean that online schools are going away post-pandemic (Kingsbury, 2021). In a study conducted by Schwartz et al. (2020), district leaders expressed that remote learning will be here to stay;

they saw it as an innovative practice of the future. In fact, one in five of the district leaders had already adopted, planned to adopt, or were considering adopting a digital learning option for students post-pandemic (Schwartz et al., 2020). The motivation for these permanent changes included increased flexibility for students and meeting family demand in order to sustain enrollment (Schwartz et al. 2020). Beck & Beasley (2021) point out that there is still a lack of research regarding online schools, specifically about differentiation in an online learning environment. Schwartz et al. (2020) agree, and indicate that policies and district leadership will need to develop innovative, sound, and effective instructional systems for the subsequent school years.

### ***Best Practices in an Online Learning Environment***

Since the early 2000's, colleges and universities have seen dramatic changes in enrollment for online learning (Allen & Seamen, 2008). With the increase in online learning at higher education institutions, research on this topic has followed. Elementary schools, on the other hand, are relatively new to the online learning space (Archambault, 2018). While the use of technological platforms, applications, and websites have been used for many years in physical classrooms, there are great differences between technological integration and teaching remotely. While there is still a great deal to learn, there are best practices that educators and administrators can pull from when designing online coursework at the elementary level.

**Traditional Education Strategies.** It might seem contradictory to recommend that teachers use traditional teaching methods in an online format. Isn't the whole point of online learning to be innovative and push past the traditional mold? Well, it turns out that many of the ingredients for a well-run physical classroom stay the same in an online



environment; the research-based best practices hold up irrespective of the physical walls of the classroom (Anthony, 2019). Some of these foundational elements include the quality of teacher instruction, community, differentiation, and engagement. With that said, there are distinct skills and strategies that online teachers should hone and utilize in order to best serve their students. Furthermore, there are foundations that must be in place in an online learning environment that differ from a traditional classroom setting.

**Foundational Needs of Online Learning Environments.** There are certain foundational necessities that must be in place for students to successfully navigate learning in a digital classroom. First and foremost is reliable internet access (Morgan, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2020). Secondly, access to a technological device for learning, such as an iPad or laptop, is also an important factor in student success. Domina et al. (2021) found that families with more access to material resources resulted in greater educational success in online learning. Morgan (2020) similarly found that families that make under \$75,000 per year were statistically less likely to have adequate technological resources. In the study by Schwartz et al. (2020), they found that districts with at least 50% students of color or students who qualified for free or reduced lunch identified these fundamentals as a significant challenge for their online learning rollout as compared to other schools. Lepp et al. (2021) found similar trends in relation to economic inequities and ability for students to effectively participate in distance learning. District leaders across the country were aware of these challenges during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, and many worked creatively to find solutions (Domina et al., 2021). It is clear that technological access is a foundational component of a successful and equitable online school experience for all students. In order for schools to implement best practices in their

educational programming, ensuring a solid foundation for technological accessibility must come first.

**Guidelines for Successful Implementation.** With so many pedagogical options to sift through, it can be easy for teachers to become overwhelmed when designing an online learning environment. Fortunately, educators are not without guidance in their pursuit of digital instruction. Standards and guidelines have been developed by the International Society for Technology in Education- ISTE (2021), which aims to keep student-centered instruction at the forefront. The educator standards by ISTE include: *learner, leader, citizen, collaborator, designer, facilitator, and analyst* (International Society for Technology in Education, 2021). ISTE (2021) additionally has seven standards for students: *empowered learner, digital citizen, knowledge constructor, innovative designer, computational thinker, creative communicator, and global collaborator*. Each of these standards include sub-standards (e.g. 7a, 7b, etc.) that further detail the benchmarks that students and educators should strive to meet (International Society for Technology in Education, 2021). Morgan (2020) recommends the usage of these standards in order to ensure an equitable and effective learning experience for all students enrolled in online learning. Whether an educator is a novice to the field of online education, or a seasoned online educator, these standards can serve as helpful touch points for guiding student-driven instruction and ensuring alignment with best practices.

**Development of Community.** Just like in a traditional school setting, the development of community has far-reaching effects for students, families, and educators. Strong classroom communities can be developed online in numerous ways. One of these ways is through strong parent-teacher ties. At Starpoint Elementary in Fort Worth, Texas,

teachers facilitated a coffee hour for parents and teachers; attendees were able to learn more about how to support their students through remote learning from the special education staff (Chamberlain et al., 2020). This open communication between teachers and parents also plays an important role in the success of online learning. Morgan (2020) recommends clearly communicating expectations, having an accessible FAQ page for families, well-updated websites, and the use of texting apps to facilitate quick parent-teacher communication (e.g. the Remind app). Social ties amongst the families of students are also important to student success (Domina et al., 2021). Domina et al. (2021) refer to this concept as *formal social capital*, and found that families with less contact with other parents had significantly reduced returns on their educational outcomes.

Teachers play an important role in building and sustaining community in their digital classrooms. When students are not able to be face to face, greater efforts must be made to foster a sense of togetherness. Although it is sometimes easier to use videos created by other educators, there is value in teachers making their own videos for their students in order to feel connected (Anderson, 2020, as cited in Morgan, 2020). While in lockdown from the COVID-19 pandemic, educators at Starpoint (introduced above) also met daily to discuss and implement communication strategies, generate ideas for community-building, and ensure that students were covered when it came to counseling services (Chamberlain et al., 2020). However it is achieved, teacher-parent, teacher-student, student-student, and parent-parent relationships must be prioritized during the school year to bolster successful learning outcomes for students.

**Student-Centered Learning.** Student-centered pedagogy involves making instructional decisions based on what will best serve the academic, social, emotional

needs of the students in the class. One way to achieve this is to utilize differentiation and engagement practices in the classroom.

Differentiation is multifaceted. One way to differentiate is to target different preferred learning styles. Video can be a great way to differentiate for students in a digital learning environment (Palaigeorgiou & Palaigeorgiou, 2019). Not only is it engaging for students, but it also can be accommodating as students can pause, rewind, and often read captions as they learn (Chen, 2012, as cited in Palaigeorgiou & Palaigeorgiou, 2019).

Another way to differentiate instruction is to give students choice in working independently or collaboratively. Lepp et al. (2021) found that some students were more motivated and engaged when they were given the opportunity to work in groups or partners. Some teachers differentiate by the learning mode as well. Chamberlain et al. (2020) discuss the role that multimodal text can play, describing that it can, “communicate information not only through the linguistic mode but also through visuals, photos, drawings, graphics, and even video” (p. 247). Students can also demonstrate their comprehension of concepts, texts, and other learning through multimodal activities and projects. At Starpoint Elementary, some students displayed their understanding of Charlotte’s Web through the use of oral presentations, visuals, and video creation (Chamberlain et al., 2021).

Oftentimes in student-centered classrooms, the teacher becomes the facilitator of student learning. In a research experiment involving self-paced instruction, Palaigeorgiou and Palaigeorgiou (2019) discovered that students found the self-paced, interactive videos to be engaging and helpful to their learning, while the teacher served as a mentor around the classroom. While this example was completed in a physical classroom, this strategy

could also be utilized in an online learning environment. Flipped classrooms, where students listen to the lesson during their independent instructional time, is another way for teachers to step into the role of mentor when they have face time with students (Palaigeorgiou & Palaigeorgiou, 2019). This strategy allows students to ask questions, participate in small groups, and receive feedback and support from their teacher in real time.

It is important to note that not all online learning experiences need to be- or should be- done with technology. Morgan (2020) warns of the dangers of too much screen time. Fortunately, there are numerous ways to engage students off-screen by implementing instruction with hands-on projects, experiential learning, and printed materials. These materials can be presented during live instructional time or submitted electronically to the designated learning platform of the class (Morgan, 2020).

### ***Benefits and Challenges of Online Learning***

There are numerous benefits to online learning. However, with the advantages also come the disadvantages. This part of the paper will seek to underscore a few of the benefits, as well as challenges to consider when planning online instruction.

**The Benefit of Flexibility.** A critical advantage of online learning is the flexibility it can offer for students and educators. Finish a lesson early? Students can log off for the day. A student medical appointment is going to pull a student out of reading class? The lesson can be recorded and watched at a later time. Does a student need regular movement breaks? They can work at a standing desk, walk around their home, or jump on the treadmill while they participate in class. Perry and Pilati (2011) also argue that online instruction allows educators to become more purposeful in their pedagogical

practices. When teachers are meeting live with their students, they can assess for understanding and then quickly determine breakout groups (groups assigned to different virtual “rooms” on the meeting platform).

Lepp et al. (2021) analyzed teacher decisions during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and found that most teachers were motivated by short-term goals. The goals varied, but included keeping workload appropriate for both students and teachers, putting a greater focus on student social-emotional wellbeing over academics, and motivating students to engage in class (Lepp et al., 2021). While this focus on short-term goals proved to be unique to the time period of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are still lessons that can be learned from the teachers’ willingness to adapt to the needs of their students. Chamberlain et al. (2020) similarly found themes of flexibility to be important to teachers in their research; they stated that the ability for students and teachers to be flexible to new ways of teaching and learning was an important factor in online instruction.

Other flexibility considerations may include a student who, for their own safety or that of a family member, can avoid unnecessary exposure to germs and viruses that are likely to be found in school buildings. Furthermore, Beck and Beasley (2021) discuss students being able to shelter from bullies as a possible benefit to online learning. Whether the choice is made for safety, social-emotional health, or simply a fondness for online learning, the flexibility of distance learning could be a benefit to many families.

**The Benefit of Accommodation and Innovation.** There are wide-ranging options for accommodation and innovation in an online classroom. As technology continues to evolve, and as elementary online learning becomes more commonplace, the possibilities will likely continue to expand.

On some platforms, such as the learning management system Schoology, teachers are able to assign material to a designated group of students instead of the entire class. When differentiating for academic levels, student interest, or to accommodate a student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), teachers can discreetly direct personalized learning material to the child's assignment list. Some students may have IEP goals that focus on engagement or participation in class. In an online learning environment, these students may feel more comfortable typing their answers versus having to raise their hand in front of the class and speak. Perry and Pilati (2011) argue that accommodations online are even more effective than ones that can be used in the traditional classroom. They give an example of an 'alt tag,' which can describe an image to someone who is visually impaired.

Accommodating for the strengths and weaknesses of students is another benefit to online learning. There are options for students to be accelerated in lessons if they are quickly grasping the material, as well as the option to slow down lessons for students who need more time (Perry & Pilati, 2011).

Online learning environments lend themselves to innovative learning strategies. In research by Palaigeorgiou & Palaigeorgiou (2019), students used a combination of tablets, self-paced interactive videos, and collaborative discussions with impressive learning outcomes. In reflecting with the class, the students expressed a desire to learn in that style again. Other teachers have found success using virtual field trips to capture student attention. Delacruz (2019) even studied ways that teachers and students were able to make their own virtual field trips. If students were studying the Sahara Desert, for example, they could demonstrate their learning through this creative output. Other

creative ways to demonstrate student learning include the creation of virtual presentations, websites, videos, and podcasts.

**The Challenge of Teacher Preparedness.** Gudmundsdittir and Hathaway (2021) found that 92 percent of teachers did not have online teaching experience prior to the COVID-19 school shutdown in 2020. This is a staggering number, and one that surely had implications for student learning. In order to establish an effective online learning environment, teachers must have a solid grasp of both pedagogical and technological skills (Menchaca and Bekele, 2008, as cited in Perry & Pilati, 2011). It was found that schools which were already virtual prior to the COVID-19 outbreak outperformed the schools who had to suddenly shift from in-person instruction to remote learning (Kingsbury, 2021). When one considers the skills that would have already been fostered by the already-virtual classroom teachers, it makes sense that the learning outcomes would outperform the inexperienced teachers, especially as many only had days to pivot in the direction of remote instruction (Lepp et al., 2021). With more schools going online in the future, it is imperative that teachers gain the necessary skills to effectively implement online instruction.

Professional development is one way to fill in these educational gaps for teachers, as quality online teaching does not occur without effective training and support (Perry & Pilati, 2011). At Starpoint Elementary in Fort Worth, Texas, a laboratory school in partnership with Texas Christian University (TCU), teachers were able to request professional development by the university faculty to fit the needs of their new teaching context (Chamberlain et al., 2020). However, not all teachers were given the opportunity to participate in professional development during the COVID-19 shutdown. Perry and



Pilati (2011) opine that inadequate professional development and preparation for online teachers is equivalent to giving a traditional classroom teacher an unsuitable classroom learning environment.

Having a solid knowledge base of technology is important for online educators. Not only will teachers be expected to have sufficient knowledge for teaching purposes, but they will also need to support students in developing their own digital competence (Lepp et al., 2021). Just like in a brick and mortar school, social-emotional health is an important consideration when it comes to instructional planning. It is important for educators to understand the unique social and emotional needs that students have in an online setting (Schwartz et al., 2020) and be able to implement community- and relationship-building activities into the instructional time. One study found that six out of ten district leaders indicated that help with social-emotional learning was their greatest need during remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schwartz et al., 2020). The next section will discuss this challenge further.

**The Challenge of Social Emotional Health.** As important as it is for effective academic instruction to be implemented, the focus on social and emotional health must be prioritized in order to keep a focus on the whole child (Chamberlain et al., 2020). This does not always come easy, however, as one study conducted around the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, educators listed social-emotional health as the top rated need among the six given options (Schwartz et al., 2020). Domina et al. (2021) point to studies that indicate possible negative effects on students' mental health when participating in distance learning. Research shows that more opportunities for social-emotional learning translate into increased engagement in class (Domina et al., 2021).

There are strategies to combat this challenge, however. Some teachers began to organize student lunches over Zoom to increase student engagement and provide social interaction (Chamberlain et al., 2020). Lepp et al. (2021) indicate that the educators who participated in their research also emphasized the importance of socialization during the school day. These educators intentionally allowed time for students to connect and socialize at the beginning of lessons, occasionally mid-lesson, and also at the end of lessons. In another school, a focus on connections with characters during literacy kept students engaged and presented opportunities for students to relate to each other's stories and emotions (Chamberlain et al., 2020).

### ***Differing Perspectives on the Efficacy of Online Instruction***

There is a large bank of knowledge on the effectiveness of online education, but researchers do not always agree on the quality of the education. Domina et al. (2021) raise concerns about the quality and consistency of effective online implementation, but also acknowledge that many studies have shown how remote instruction can be just as effective as in-person instruction. Perry and Pilati (2011) similarly cite studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (Means, 2011, as cited in Perry & Pilati, 2011) that demonstrate that students who were enrolled in online learning performed just as well or better than their in-person counterparts.

There are various other studies that suggest negative learning outcomes from online instruction. Beck and Beasley (2021) discuss that many studies have found lower achievement scores for students who were enrolled in online learning programs. Schwartz et al. (2020) similarly cite studies that show lower academic performance in most academic subjects. The hypothesized reasons included less fidelity to the standards,

inadequate accommodations, and accessibility concerns for students whose primary language is not English (Gill et al., 2015, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2020). Perry and Pilati (2011) believe that academic rigor must be baked into the instructional plan from the beginning, not included as an afterthought in online instruction.

Despite the conflicting findings, online instruction is here to stay. Therefore, the importance of professional development, proper implementation, and student-centered instruction at the elementary level remains an important topic for additional research.

### **Effective Implementation of CRP in a Digital Learning Environment**

A look at the racial demographics of student enrollment in online learning during the 2020-21 school year suggests that there is a disproportionate amount of students of color in online learning compared to their white K-12 peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). For the 2021-22 school year online enrollment in my school district of a Saint Paul, Minnesota suburb, this trend is also exemplified. This disproportionality necessitates that online teachers must have a strong grasp of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) principles and strategies in order to effectively engage all students, especially those who have been historically underserved (Vail, 2018).

Current research is slim on the successful implementation of CRP principles in elementary digital learning environments. Research that does exist around this topic is either only tangentially related or is at least a few years old. This gap in research could be due to the relatively recent uptick in online learning enrollment for elementary-aged students. While the upward trend in K-12 online enrollment predates the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, there is undoubtedly more momentum in the growth of online learning programming since the 2019-2020 school year. Many school districts in the nearby

metropolitan area of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota are developing new online learning platforms for the 2021-22 school year, including the district where I teach. With the development of more online learning programs comes the responsibility of ensuring an equitable, engaging, and flexible learning model for all.

This concluding section will seek to outline the common threads found in the research of CRP and best practices in online learning. By finding common ground between these practices, the hope is that teachers, administrators, and district leaders will be better equipped to develop programming with equity at the forefront of instructional design. Common themes identified include: the centering of equity, student-driven learning for maximized student engagement, the importance of cultivating community, and the role of culture in student learning. The few research articles that do exist on this combined topic of CRP and online learning will be woven into the subsections that follow.

### ***Centering Equity***

Equity should be top of mind whenever planning online instructional time, school policies, and curriculum (Gorski, 2016). When planning for online instruction, one of the first considerations should be student access to instructional materials. This often translates to reliable internet connection and school-provided technology (Morgan, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2020). As stated in the literature review, equitable learning opportunities cannot take place without these fundamental resources. Other considerations for equity in education include: strong teacher-student relationships, the development of solid family partnerships, fostering parental ties, representative curriculum, social action-based learning opportunities, and engaging and differentiated class activities.

It is also important for educators to remain flexible and responsive to their students' needs. Understanding the learning preferences, interests, and strengths of students can take time, but the development of strong community and teacher-student relationships can help educators understand how to prioritize student-centered learning. Vail (2018) encourages online educators to embrace the fluidity and flexibility of the digital classroom. They believe that an online learning environment can mirror the digital world of today, and focus should be on students' participation and engagement.

This 'culture of online school' may not come naturally to all students, however. Jung (2014) points out that students cannot be assumed to be digitally savvy, even though the generation of K-12 students in 2021 would be considered to be 'digital natives.' The expectations and resources of online learning must be established and taught, leaving flexibility for necessary adaptations (Jung, 2014). Data must be collected and analyzed in order to assess who is in need of further support in an online learning environment. Vail (2018) briefly reviews the literature around higher education online participation differences broken down by gender. While some studies noted that females performed better, other studies found contradictory results or no differences at all (Vail, 2018). This exemplifies the importance of data collection and analysis in an online setting, especially at the foundational years of elementary education. Aside from gender gaps in performance, teachers should monitor for racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, and other cultural opportunity gaps. If opportunity gaps are identified, steps should be taken to ensure equitable access to online learning for all students.

### ***Student-Driven Pedagogy for Maximizing Student Engagement***

Student-driven instruction considers students' social, emotional, and instructional needs above all else. It is important to honor students' complex cultural and linguistic identities, while learning about each child as an individual with their own set of preferences, interests, and life backgrounds (Gay, 2002). Furthermore, no two students' needs are exactly the same when it comes to their learning experiences. In an online school setting, where there are numerous resources available to educators and students, being willing to creatively meet each of the students where they are at is imperative. Vail (2018) acknowledges that using digital platforms for student learning is not new, but with the increasing racial and cultural diversity of student enrollment, they too recommend adopting a culturally responsive pedagogical approach to online instruction. Teachers must be flexible to differentiate, accommodate, and engage students through creative and digitally-savvy means (Beck & Beasley, 2021).

Throughout the literature review of CRP and online learning best practices, the theme of engagement came up time and time again; engagement is at the heart of student-driven learning. Without effective engagement, students' educational outcomes will suffer (Domina et al., 2021; Abacioglu et al., 2020). The use of ISTE's standards support this idea of student-centered instruction and engagement (International Society for Technology in Education, 2021). The standards ensure that learning is a student-driven process with an emphasis on "discovery, exploration, and creativity" (Delacruz, 2019, p. 429).

Part of this engagement is giving students options, choices, and opportunities to solve real-world problems. One of CRP's essential tenets is, after all, for students to

engage in examining and problem solving social problems in their communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When putting choice and control into students' hands- for example, through project based learning- teachers can support students' growth as community-minded citizens, as well as the necessary engagement for online learning success. Delacruz (2019) conducted research on how to effectively implement digital literacy initiatives with an emphasis on global citizenship. At the center of this was a project where students designed and developed their own virtual field trips. Part of the motivation was to increase students' cultural awareness and to "develop knowledge to make their communities and societies more inclusive and sustainable" (Delacruz, 2019, p. 429). This project exemplifies the power of combining cultural competence, social action, and rigorous academics (Ladson-Billings, 1995) with best practices in online learning (International Society for Technology in Education, 2021).

### ***Community***

There is a clear connection from the literature review around the importance of establishing strong community ties. Whether that community is in the classroom, online, or the community of parents and teachers, research indicates that strong community culture has a positive impact on students' academic success and higher levels of engagement (Abacoiglu et al., 2020). Furthermore, the cultivation of a strong classroom community can offer benefits for students' social-emotional health as well. Lepp et al. (2021) learned that in order to benefit the community *and* social emotional health, educators created space for students to socially connect at the beginning and end of class.

Research conducted by Chamberlain et al. (2020) exemplifies the ways in which educators can support student success while building important relationships with

families. Some ideas that were implemented during their 2020-21 school year included parent coffee hours, access to regularly scheduled instructional support, and a chance for families to connect with one another. As stated earlier in the literature review, Domina et al. (2021) found that parents who had more contact with the parents of their students' peers also had increased engagement. Conversely, students whose parents were isolated from other families during emergency distance learning showed decreased academic success.

Chamberlain et al. (2021) found that some teachers invited students for Zoom lunches in order to foster community with their students. Kidwell & Penton Herrera (2019) suggest that teachers spend time in the community outside of class time in order to build relationships and support students' passions outside of school. While it is important for educators to be intentional about fostering community in their classrooms, under the right circumstances students can also drive this organically. Vail (2018) found that students went the extra mile to make further connections, whether that be through embellished discussion posts, or through the creation of their own organized learning activities. This space for student voice and action could also serve to increase student engagement and motivation. Ladson-Billings (2014) contends that community and student driven learning go hand in hand.

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

Throughout this literature review, the role of students' culture has frequently been discussed and examined. The importance of culture was not only a major factor in the successful implementation of CRP practices, but also of online learning practices as well. Just like Gorski (2016) and Aragona-Young & Sawyer (2018), Jung (2014) also cautions



educators about oversimplifying culture to a point of watered down stereotypes. In their work *Cultural Influences On Online Learning*, Jung (2014) explains the different layers of culture and its impact on the learning styles, perspectives, and strengths of students. Vail (2018) agrees that it is important to consider the cultural influences that are brought into the learning environment.

In a culturally diverse classroom, students come in with their own biases- both cultural and individual. However, Vail (2018) sees this as an opportunity for growth. When students are introduced to different ways of thinking and being, the foundation of the classroom is strengthened. This argument also lends itself to the need for a globalized classroom. Students are no longer confined by their geographic barriers, as they will likely take online classes, meet diverse people in their communities, and very likely work with others who come from different cultural backgrounds than themselves (Vail, 2018). Technology allows for numerous opportunities for students to communicate with those around the world and research global issues, and learn about the world they live in (Lepp et al., 2012, as cited in Delacruz, 2019). The digital classroom is a great opportunity for students to bolster their cultural competencies- including their own- and become a prepared citizen for the future. Delacruz (2019) agrees about the importance of developing global citizenship in the digital classroom, and adds that the knowledge they gain from this development can be applied to solving real-world problems in society and their communities.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As evidenced by the four themes explored above, there are many intersections between the best practices of enacting CRP and effective online teaching and learning.

These include: the importance of centering equity in teaching and program design, the value to engagement of utilizing student-driven learning approaches, the importance of cultivating strong community in the classroom and beyond, and the impact and role of culture in online learning environments. Many of the best practices identified are similar to those found in traditional classrooms (Anthony, 2019), but have considered the unique advantages and challenges of online learning. While the intersection of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and online learning at the elementary level has fairly limited research, the growth of online learning necessitates the continued development of knowledge about how to best support equitable student learning.

In the following chapter, an explanation of the professional development capstone project will be given. The findings from the literature review will be synthesized into main learning targets for the teachers at the new online academy in my district. These learning targets will be displayed through a presentation and a lesson plan for its dissemination will be created.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

The United States is becoming increasingly more diverse with each decade (Frey, 2020). Multiculturalism in schools can bring challenges and enrichment. When teachers are properly trained in theories and practices such as culturally relevant pedagogy, they can see cultural, linguistic, and other differences as strengths that add to the community. This can also prepare students for an increasingly diverse school environment, workplace, and society.

Due to the emergency learning brought on by COVID-19 in 2020, there emerges a shift toward K-12 online learning. This can be especially challenging at the elementary level, where much less research has been conducted around best practices in the digital classroom environment (Archambault, 2018). My research question works to integrate best practices of online learning and culturally relevant pedagogy. Specifically, I am asking: *How can online elementary school teachers incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into best practices for digital learning?* This question and the literature review conducted in the prior chapter led me to the development of a three-part workshop. The following section will give an overview of the workshop model.

#### Project Rationale

My capstone project is an adult workshop series where online elementary teachers will learn how to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in an online elementary classroom. There are many important considerations when designing an effective online learning program, and ensuring equitable outcomes for all students should be a top

priority. Enrollment trends demonstrate that a significant amount of students of color are enrolling in online learning classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Furthermore, there is demand from families for continued online education options for their students. All signs are pointing to remote schooling being here to stay (Kingsbury, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2020). Not only is intentional and culturally relevant design of curriculum and pedagogical approaches important, but the quality of teachers and the flexibility and willingness to differentiate and accommodate is equally critical. Research suggests that students are more engaged when they feel honored and seen in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, engagement increases when students are given choice and interest-based projects, activities, and experiments. The adult learning workshop will explore all of these themes and more.

### **Description of Project**

The design of the project will be a series of three hour-long professional development workshops. The first workshop will explore the essential tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and ground our work in these important principles. In the second workshop, I will dive into best practices for online learning at the elementary level. After completing a literature review in these two topics, I was able to identify themes that cut across best practices in CRP and online learning. The final workshop will marry the common themes of these two topics and demonstrate how online educators can effectively and intentionally integrate CRP practices into online learning course development and their development of classroom management strategies.

## Framework

The theories utilized in the design of this adult learning workshop include those of Mezirow (1981) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). Mezirow's theory finds its foundation on transformative learning, whereby the adult participants are led to question, interrogate, and examine the assumptions, perspectives, and worldviews they have long adopted. In this framework, the facilitator works to engage the participants in widening perspectives and considering inclusive and justice-oriented paths to future action (Mezirow, 1981). Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) place a strong focus on teacher reflection, utilizing feedback, and creating space for teachers to act on the changes they want to bring about. Additionally, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) state the importance of utilizing a coaching and expert support approach, which lends itself well to Mezirow's (2017) facilitator model. Mezirow's (1981) and Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2017) use of reflection and participant involvement with constructing learning and implementation plans will be important to the development of my adult learning workshops.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) also examine the importance of grounding professional development in the actual needs and contexts of the respective learning environment. As a peer teacher, I will be uniquely attuned to the educational context of our staff. However, because of the importance of connecting the work to individual teachers' needs, I will conduct a survey before commencing the workshops in order to glean data on what information is most sought after. This will also help to generalize the professional development workshop so that it can be employed in other educational contexts throughout the state or country.

Active learning and collaboration are two other key components that will be incorporated into the workshop's design. By allowing educators to "try on" strategies, they will be better able to contextualize the professional development learnings to their everyday teaching practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This work becomes even more powerful when groups of educators can collaborate and begin to adopt new norms, strategies, and ideologies together. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) recommend the formation of job-specific groupings, such as grade-level teams. During the active learning portion of my workshop, I will utilize groupings of *primary teachers* and *intermediate teachers*.

### **Setting and Audience**

The idea for my research was borne out of my 2021-22 position at the newly formed online academy in my district. While many schools used distance learning as an emergency learning plan, it is clear that many schools are implementing permanent online schools into the future. I will plan to disseminate the research through the three-part workshop for the twelve elementary teachers that are part of my program. Additionally, I will invite our administrators and intervention staff to attend. On a broader scale, the target audience includes teachers and administrators who are designing programming and curricula for elementary online learners. The workshop series would be appropriate for an elementary segment of an online school and could be delivered in-person at the central professional development meeting location or online, if necessary. This workshop series could also benefit online curriculum writers and administrators hoping to support CRP initiatives in online classrooms. However, the workshop will be addressed specifically to educators in the role of online teacher. For this reason, the workshop series would work

well when used in conjunction with team Professional Learning Communities (PLC) meetings for further discussion and exploration of topics and implementation.

### **Assessment**

A pre-workshop survey will be conducted in order to gauge participant knowledge and identify wonderings or areas of need around equity in online learning. Throughout the workshop, discussion and an end-of-workshop survey will be utilized in order to gather feedback, assess participant learning, and better prepare for the following workshop. Participants will also be given a chance on the survey to ask questions and request follow-up conversations around a topic of interest.

### **Timeline**

This project will be completed by the fall term, December 2021. The workshop will be scheduled for January and February of 2022. These workshops will each be an hour long and will take place over the course of six weeks.

### **Conclusion**

In chapter three, an explanation of the capstone project was given. An adult learning workshop series will be developed around the research question, *How can online elementary school teachers incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into best practices for digital learning?* This workshop will be delivered to a team of online teachers at the elementary level. The pedagogical approaches for this workshop include transformative learning (Mezirow, 1981) and active participation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In chapter four, a detailed description of the formulated workshop will be presented.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reflection

#### Introduction

The purpose of this capstone project was to investigate the research question, *How can online elementary school teachers incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into best practices for digital learning?* As a fourth grade online teacher this year, I knew it was important to integrate culturally responsive practices into my online classroom, but I felt like I had very little guidance on how to do this. Through my literature review and creation of professional development, I have been able to walk away with important takeaways around best practices in culturally relevant pedagogy, online teaching and learning, and- importantly- how these can successfully be integrated together. In this chapter, I will reflect on the various learnings I am taking away from my participation in this research project; I will revisit the literature review and discuss important influences to my work; lastly, this chapter will explore the various benefits of my professional development to the profession. A summary of my reflections will be included at the end.

#### Major Learnings

Like the majority of teachers around the world in 2020, I was thrown into the world of online teaching within a matter of days. I had no time to research best practices. My emergency planning centered on what I felt would be effective learning for my students, what I was capable of figuring out by myself without technology support, and what I could realistically pull together for the next day without spending hours and hours of time prepping lessons and researching. Going into the 2020-21 school year, I was aware that it was very possible that we would move between models of instruction,



including fully in-person, hybrid instruction, and fully remote instruction. Through these transitions of modes of learning, I learned a lot about asynchronous learning and synchronous live Zoom instruction. However, I was left with even more questions about what is truly effective, equitable instruction at the elementary level. When I learned that I would be teaching a diverse, fully remote online elementary class for the 2021-22 school year, I knew that this research would be a great opportunity to ensure that I could feel prepared to serve my students using best practices.

Through my research on this capstone project, there have been numerous takeaways and important learnings for me. I was surprised to learn that much of what comprises effective education in a brick and mortar classroom still stands true in an online learning environment. Relationships, accommodations, culturally relevant material, and asset-based mindsets and learning are all themes that traverse the physical classroom into the online sphere of learning. I learned that, in many ways, online learning can be advantageous for modification and accommodations for students. Additionally, I learned that teachers may have to be more creative when it comes to providing social opportunities for students, but that taking the time to do this in an online environment- just like in a physical classroom- has important benefits for the classroom community and individuals within that classroom.

As I was planning for my professional development, it is fair to say that I did not know where to start. I have never planned professional development, let alone a series of workshops. It was important for me to ensure that it included active engagement and truly useful learning activities. I know firsthand how frustrating it can be to sit through hours-long professional development opportunities just to feel like I either got further

behind on my work, or did not see a clear connection between the learning objectives and what I felt I could realistically accomplish in my classroom.

### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

As I was creating the professional development workshop series for my capstone, I found that I relied heavily on certain researchers over others. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995; 2005; 2014) comes to mind as a researcher whose research served as the foundation for my understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). Not only did she coin this term, but she also has followed the enactment of CRP principles in classrooms around the country and offered follow-up research and perspective around her noticings. Ladson-Billings (2014) understood intimately that a theoretical framework put into the wild can become a watered down version of its original purpose or vision.

### ***Literature Review on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy***

Gorski (2016) and Aragona-Young (2018) were go-to researchers for exploring more about the unintended consequences of a theory going mainstream. Both of these researchers were able to identify worrying patterns in the enactment of CRP. Both favor a position around centering equity over cultural initiatives, which can result in diminished results for students (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018; Gorski, 2016). For me, it was equally helpful to understand the best practices of CRP as it was to understand the potential pitfalls. Examples and non-examples can be useful illustrations for how to engage in equity work in our own practice. I made sure to incorporate these learnings into the CRP professional development session.

While identifying common themes throughout the literature, I often found myself citing work from Gay (2002) and Abacioglu et al. (2020). This was especially true on the

themes that focused on teacher qualities and teacher attitude. In my professional development, these themes are referred to as “Care and Understanding” and “Asset-based Ideology.” These researchers understand the importance of teacher qualities’ impact on student success. I was so convinced by the findings of their research that I opted to include two of the themes from their research, supported by others, in my professional development workshop on CRP.

### ***Literature Review on Best Practices in Online Teaching and Learning***

When it came to understanding best practices in online learning, I was surprised to find that I could turn to standards and guidelines that were already developed by the International Society for Technology in Education- ISTE (2021). As a teacher who has done distance for part or all of three school years now, I was not formerly aware that these guidelines existed. Being able to use these standards as a starting place in my research and see how they framed student-centered instruction was incredibly helpful not only to my own professional practice but also as a researcher identifying best practices for online teaching and learning at the elementary level.

### ***Finding Unifying Themes from Both Literature Reviews***

As I began to connect the unifying strands of CRP and online teaching and learning best practices, I was able to find patterns throughout both subsections of my literature review. These themes were centered in the professional development workshop series that I developed throughout the capstone process. One example of this includes the importance of relationships for student success. In my literature review of CRP, it became clear that understanding students as individuals, valuing their backgrounds and cultural assets, as well as fostering a community where each student can feel welcome and valued

is incredibly important to the development of a successful learning community. Likewise, the literature review of online teaching and learning best practices continued to mention the importance of community development and relationship building. Interestingly, this theme was noticed amongst numerous researchers (Chamberlain et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020; Domina et al., 2021; Lepp et al., 2021) and not primarily focused on by one or two authors.

Reading through over thirty pieces of literature during this project, I was able to identify various themes that emerged in each subtopic and unifying themes from both subtopics. Each researcher and literature review impacted the final product and helped form a more comprehensive understanding of best practices in both CRP and online learning. However, there were researchers whose work was so seminal or impactful that I found myself frequenting their research to better understand best practices and the positive impact it could have on students. In this next section, I will continue to reflect on the project as a whole, focusing on where I will go next, and where I believe the research still has room to grow.

### **Project Reflection**

In the district where I teach, the impact of the 2020, 2021 COVID-19 pandemic pushed district leadership to consider an online-only option for students year-round starting in the 2021-22 school year. Similarly, districts around the state and country are continuing to build out distance learning options for families. While the reasoning for families to choose a distance learning option will vary, it is critical that programs are well-informed and researched around best practices in online learning. Furthermore, just like in a brick and mortar classroom, a learning system can never consider itself fully

prepared to serve students until equity and cultural relevance is integrated into every part of the institution. This includes instruction, policies, curriculum development, and more. My completion of this project has helped me understand where the efforts should lie in this integration process of CRP and online learning best practices. These results of my project could also be used to advance policies or equitable initiatives around culturally relevant online elementary education.

### ***Limitations***

There are limitations to my project, however. The online teaching program in my district does not have a single housed location, as teachers are spread over three main school sites and, as of this writing, many teachers have been given the choice to work from home due to the lack of space in a growing program. The school sites where teachers are housed are in actively-functioning schools, meaning the issue of space for elementary teachers to gather for professional development could prove problematic.

Further, professional development initiatives in my district are often set by those much higher in responsibility than myself. It is possible it would be difficult to find time for a three-part workshop during an already-busy school year. There is also the possibility that with our online program being so new, leadership will want to be in control of which best practices are prioritized and given time to develop.

### ***Future Research Direction***

First and foremost, online learning at the elementary level is still new on a wide scale. Research found that online learning programs that have been around for numerous years fared better than districts who had to turn to online learning on a dime (Kingsbury, 2021). With less than two years still since the beginning of emergency distance learning,

there is not enough information on how well prepared newly-developed online programs are to meet the needs of diverse learners. Additionally, there is very little research on culturally relevant or sustaining practices in an online learning space at the elementary level. There is a need for additional research into how current elementary online models are supporting students of color and students of diverse backgrounds or needs.

Additionally, a natural next step for my project could be to develop self-evaluation rubrics for teachers, administrators, and program heads.

### ***Benefit to the Profession***

My sincere hope is that through the development of the three-series workshop model, more teachers who are new to online learning at the elementary level- like me- will feel more prepared and effective in their instructional decisions for the diverse learners they serve. I believe that by sharing this professional learning opportunity with the staff at the elementary portion of our newly-developed online district program, we can grow together and grow in our teaching to best serve our students.

### ***Plans for Dissemination***

With my unit plan being finished in December of 2021, I plan to approach leadership about the professional development workshops before the end of the calendar year. My desire would be to implement the workshops during our weekly programming meetings, which are also conveniently scheduled for one hour. I will suggest to do these every two weeks beginning in February and ending in mid-March.

### **Conclusion**

In chapter four, I reflected on the capstone project process that was borne from the research question, *How can online elementary school teachers incorporate culturally*

*relevant pedagogy into best practices for digital learning?* I revisited the literature review and discussed the most influential research to the development of my professional development workshop series. Additionally, limitations of my research, as well as recommended next steps, were offered. Finally, a reflection on the benefit of my research and capstone project to the profession was included.

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