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## Employing Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices in English Language Arts Classrooms

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EMPLOYING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES IN ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOMS

by

Austin Niederkorn

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master's of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Background

The idea of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is something that has stuck with me throughout my entire teacher education program, and I believe it's important to learn more about this concept as I plan to move into my own classroom and professional career. Students come into our classrooms with a vast range of cultures, languages, and experiences, all of which should be celebrated and represented within the classroom community. In an English Language Arts (ELA) class, this is especially pertinent because the teacher often has the flexibility to incorporate ways for students to see their own cultures, languages, and prior experiences reflected in the curriculum.

The curriculum students are engaging with as well as their cultural representation within that curriculum (and the classroom community as a whole) can greatly impact and help to develop their academic skills. Being that I'm becoming an ELA teacher myself, I found it interesting to consider the relationship between culturally responsive teaching practices and ELA classrooms and curriculums. Specifically, I'm interested in exploring the benefits of using culturally responsive teaching within a middle school ELA classroom, and determine how teachers can best utilize these strategies to maximize their students' personal, social, and academic experiences. My research question developed from these considerations. *What are the benefits of employing Culturally Responsive Teaching in ELA classrooms?*

**Rationale**

My love for teaching has really developed over the course of my life. I have always loved school; however, the thought of actually making a career out of teaching had never even crossed my mind. I received my Bachelor's of Arts in English from Hamline, and anticipated becoming a technical writer, editor, or copywriter. Thankfully, that path never panned out, and I'm forever grateful for that. Teaching was always in the back of my mind as something I would love to do for a career, but I just never took action on it. Then, following a number of different occupations that never gave me much satisfaction or fulfillment, I decided to enroll in Hamline's Master's of Arts in Teaching program and pursue my teaching license.

I have learned so much during my teacher education program, much of which I was able to implement during my student teaching experience at Coon Rapids Middle School. The school had many students of color who came from a wide variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. This dynamic made my student teaching experience extremely worthwhile, as I believe students of color often find their cultures, histories, and experiences left out of their education. I worked in a 7th grade ELA classroom with a cooperating teacher that utilized CRT methods to highlight the unique backgrounds of the students in her classroom. I was shocked to see how much of an impact her methodology had on those students, especially when I considered what my own education was like ten plus years ago. It was refreshing to see such a positive change within the classroom for students of color, not just academically, but personally and experientially. Everything about that classroom was different from the norm (or, at least what I thought was the

norm) in the best possible way, and that realization was why I became determined to embody culturally responsive teaching practices in my own future classroom.

Additionally, the school itself stressed the importance of using culturally responsive teaching practices to all its teachers in an effort to best serve and support the academic needs of their students. The principal integrated CRT training into the monthly staff meetings as well as the professional development seminars I attended while student teaching. I remember sitting in those meetings and thinking, “wow, what a great way to ensure that *every* student can have a meaningful, and inclusive educational experience.” Over time, I became more and more of the lead teacher during student teaching, and it was then that I was able to try out some of what I’d learned in my own practice. I educated myself on the backgrounds of the students in the class, built meaningful connections with each of my students, and really pushed myself to find ways to highlight their cultures and/or experiences within the classroom.

As I look ahead to having my own classroom, I am reminded of my time at Coon Rapids Middle School, and those memories are what have sparked my desire to learn more about culturally responsive teaching. I saw firsthand the positive impact that this teaching pedagogy made on students, teachers, the community, and the school itself. The overall school atmosphere promoted positivity, inclusion, understanding, respect, support, and taking ownership of one’s own learning. The experience completely shattered my outdated perception of what *school* was, and its impact solidified my belief that I must be that kind of teacher for my future students. Moreover, I realized how much I truly value genuine, positive, and growth-minded leadership as well as being a part of a supportive and inclusive school community.

It's critical for teachers to understand the significance behind Culturally Responsive Teaching because, whether they like it or not, their attitudes, appreciation and respect for different cultures within their classroom will have a direct impact on the students (and families) they're serving. Teachers should continuously educate themselves on how to better integrate students' cultures into their curriculum because hopefully their collective efforts will move us in the direction of a more universal multicultural education system. I don't mean to discount the teachers who are working towards providing a multicultural education; rather, my intention is to reinforce and validate the teaching practices of those already using CRT, and to encourage more teachers (both current and future) to learn about the lasting benefits for students who are taught using culturally responsive practices.

Culturally Responsive Teaching doesn't just impact teachers, though. In fact, one could argue that it makes the biggest difference for students and their families. Many students in years past would attest that they don't feel like their cultures, languages, or personal experiences were represented in the curriculum they were taught. This is a problem for current and future teachers, and we are charged with changing this narrative. All students deserve to feel celebrated for who they are, where they come from, and the unique characteristics that make them their own person. Schools play such an important role in supporting the healthy development of children, therefore, it's vital that our classrooms promote inclusion, understanding, and respect for any and all cultures, languages, and experiences. Culturally responsive teaching, in my opinion, is an excellent tool to ensure that students (and their families) feel validated for their individuality, and celebrated for the different cultures they bring to the classroom.



Education is experiencing a shift in terms of what we want a student's education to be, how we want our teachers to teach, and how we want the respective administration to support these needs. First introduced in the 1990's by Gloria Ladson-Billings, culturally responsive teaching has now started to gain more traction within school districts across the country. The education system, from top to bottom (administration to students), is beginning to see the benefits of teaching, employing, and reinforcing CRT practices within their classrooms. Many students, particularly students of color, are now able to make connections between the curriculum and their own cultures, languages, and experiences. Teachers are able to create welcoming and supportive classroom spaces that promote equity and inclusion for all students. Administration will continually reinforce these positive CRT strategies to teachers through professional development training, and also create a sense of community and unity for students, their families, and the entire school staff. Changing the narrative of education, particularly when it comes to the representation, appreciation, and inclusion of all cultures, requires a collective effort to do what's in the best interest of our students.

One of the biggest reasons why I wanted to become a teacher was because I was inspired to become a part of this changing narrative. I have had some amazing teachers throughout my life, specifically ELA teachers, that have believed in me, supported my ambitions, and mentored me as I've pursued my post-graduate education. I can speak to how that made me feel as both a student and a person. I felt empowered within the classroom, but also felt understood, recognized, and cared for outside of the classroom. Sure, my experience just speaks for one person; however, I say this to illustrate the positive influence that great teachers can have on their students. I am not blind to the fact

that many students *don't* have experiences like this with their teachers, or even school in general. I will strive to give these experiences and feelings to *all* of my students, especially my students of color. Culturally responsive teaching will allow me to recognize all of my students' unique cultures and experiences so that they too feel empowered to achieve their dreams.

Within the context of ELA classrooms, there is so much that can be done to intertwine CRT and most ELA curriculums. In ELA, for the most part, we are past the point of strictly teaching “the canon” (aka, the traditional collection of texts often taught in ELA classrooms) and following the traditional curriculums of old. That being said, most ELA teachers are now afforded some flexibility with regard to the skills/content they teach, how they deliver that material, and what books, activities, and/or outside sources they use to reinforce those concepts. More and more schools are trusting their teachers to do what's in the best interest of their students when it comes to planning curriculums, lesson plans, and day-to-day activities. However, as schools become more trusting of their teachers, certain communities (those who have been marginalized by the educational system) become less trusting. I'm excited and driven to enter the field of education at this precise time, because, frankly, I welcome the level of responsibility that teachers carry on their shoulders. I want to be part of the collective movement that prioritizes the social, interpersonal, and academic needs of students before all else.

I believe Culturally Responsive Teaching can teach us (teachers) valuable lessons about how to best serve the needs of our students. Not only does this pedagogy support the cultural needs of each and every student, it can also help students access more challenging curriculum and develop higher-level thinking skills. English Language Arts

classes can be a real struggle for some students, which is why it's important to find a plethora of ways to connect the content to the different social, cultural, and personal experiences of the students in the class. The good news is that ELA teachers usually have the flexibility and autonomy to make this a reality, whether it be choosing culturally appropriate content, creating a classroom library that houses a wide variety of books (authors of different races, stories about specific cultures, etc.), or designing lesson plans and classroom activities that incorporate meaningful moments for cultural, linguistic, and/or experiential learning.

### **Summary**

Culturally Responsive Teaching is a worthwhile teaching pedagogy that emphasizes the role of culture, language, and personal experience in a student's education. Instead of separating a student's body of work into the personal and the academic, CRT argues that the two should be connected to provide the best possible education to all students. Every student's culture, language, and experience deserves a place within our classrooms, and the goal of CRT is not only to ensure that this benchmark is being met, but that these aspects of our students' identities are being interwoven into the very operation of the classroom, the building of the community, the design of the curriculum, and the daily lesson plans.

In order to better understand CRT and how to best utilize it in the classroom, one must first research its history and learn about what necessitated the shift to a more culturally-minded approach to teaching. Chapter Two will explore the history of Culturally Responsive Teaching, discuss the contributions of accredited professionals in the field who are associated with conceptualizing the pedagogy, and present an objective

scope of its development within modern-day school systems. My research will also be focused on identifying the benefits that CRT has on students and analyzing those findings to understand how these methods contribute to a positive academic experience. I will consider the role of professional development in preparing and training teachers to be culturally responsive in their practice. Additionally, I will consider CRT from an ELA perspective. My intention is to find plausible, effective strategies that can be implemented within an ELA classroom context. I am interested in the *ways in which* ELA teachers can connect content to culture, language, and experience, while also exploring how these connections can be tailored to create impactful and applicable learning experiences for students.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Background & History of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an important teaching pedagogy that highlights and recognizes the cultures, languages, and experiences of students. The concept has existed in education for quite some time, and a number of notable authors have weighed in on its validity and importance. Many argue that in order to understand culturally responsive teaching (and how to use it), one must first consider the necessity of providing students with a culturally responsive *education*. Most notably, Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, along with others, helped to lay this foundation. In their review of some of Gay and Ladson-Billings's most renowned publishings, Brittany Aronson and Judson Laughter explain the frameworks that lend themselves to a better understanding of culturally responsive education. Aronson and Laughter's text, *The theory and practice of culturally relevant education: A synthesis of research across content areas*, situates Gay and Ladson-Billings in context to demonstrate how culturally responsive education developed from two things: teaching and pedagogy.

According to the article, Gay asserts that culturally responsive teaching means to use "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches *to and through* the strengths of these students" (Aronson & Laughter, 2015, p. 165). To accomplish this goal, it means there must be teachers who understand these ideas and also know how to utilize them in their teaching practices. Specifically, based on Gay's beliefs, culturally responsive teachers are expected to be

socially and academically empowering, set high expectations for students, be multidimensional in their instruction, validate all student cultures, promote the education of the *whole* child, and use student strengths and experiences to inform their instruction (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). While that is a tall task for teachers to undertake, in order to start prioritizing culture there needs to be a collective effort to reshape our understanding of teacher responsibilities, curriculum, and instruction.

Gloria Ladson-Billings shifts our thinking to culturally relevant pedagogy, which is designed to empower students “intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Aronson & Laughter, 2015, p. 165). In her article, *Culturally responsive teaching through a historical lens: Will history repeat itself?*, Deborah Harmon agrees with Ladson-Billings by stressing the importance of empowering students via culturally responsive pedagogy:

The use of students’ cultural referents in teaching empowers students...to engage in the meaningful learning of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Culturally relevant pedagogy demands that students experience academic success, develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and develop a critical consciousness (Harmon, 2012, p. 13-14).

Empowering students is critical because it provides them with opportunities, both in the classroom and beyond, to take ownership of their learning, advocate for social change, and use their own cultural knowledge/experience to educate themselves and others.

To reflect the shift towards student empowerment and advocacy, Ladson-Billings extended her idea of culturally relevant pedagogy by saying that it must be “ever

evolving to meet the needs of students” (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). The idea that culturally relevant pedagogy is “ever evolving” implies that educators need to be reflective, innovative, and responsive to the variety of needs their students may have. Curriculums and teacher preparation programs have drastically changed in recent years in an effort to provide students with the best support possible. To achieve this end, many authors suggest it will require a concerted effort on the part of the teacher, administration, and really the district as a whole, because they’re likely the ones responsible for choosing the curriculum to begin with and/or giving teachers the flexibility to make changes.

In their article, *Addressing diversity in schools: Culturally responsive pedagogy*, Heraldo Richards, Ayanna Brown, and Timothy Forde assert that there must be reform at the institutional level to ensure that the educational system itself becomes more culturally responsive. They claim there are three areas, specifically, that need to be addressed. First, the organization of the school should be conscious about the use of physical space when it comes to school design and classroom arrangements. Second, the school’s policies and procedures should aim to meet the needs of all students, including students with diverse cultural backgrounds. Third, schools need to do a much better job of making meaningful connections with families and the community (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007). Ideally, if there is appropriate reform of the overall institution to include a culturally responsive framework, then it’s far more likely that teachers will have the guidance, resources, and support to implement that framework in their everyday practice.

The conceptual framework of the educational institution, and its influence on the curriculum being taught to students, cannot be understated. However, despite oftentimes dealing with institutional constraints, teachers play a pivotal role in ensuring students

receive a culturally responsive education. According to Richards, Brown, and Forde, teachers have the agency and skill sets to thrive in the face of adversity:

The educational system plans the curriculum for schools, and teachers as their "institutional agents" transfer the prescribed content to their students...Although the curriculum may be dictated by the school system, teachers teach it. Where the curriculum falls short in addressing the needs of all students, teachers must provide a bridge; where the system reflects cultural and linguistic insensitivity, teachers must demonstrate understanding and support. In short, teachers must be culturally responsive, utilizing materials and examples, engaging in practices, and demonstrating values that include rather than exclude students from different backgrounds. (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007, p. 68)

It's clear that a common theme of providing students with a culturally responsive education is that a lot of the responsibility rests on the shoulders of teachers. Regardless of what restraints may come from the district, administration, or the curriculum, the teachers are the ones working with those students each and every day. This is why there is such a push from teacher education programs to prepare future teachers to be culturally responsive. Institutional change can sometimes take decades, but perhaps a collective effort to better prepare the next generation of teachers can make a difference and help accelerate this change.

David Sadker and Karen Zittleman draw on the work of Ladson-Billings in their book, *Teachers, Schools, and Society*, by detailing a few of her key principles pertaining to culturally responsive education: "Students must experience academic success, which leads to a stronger self-esteem. Esteem is built on solid academic



accomplishment...Students should develop and maintain cultural competence...Students must develop critical consciousness and actively challenge social injustice” (Sadker & Zittleman, 2010, p. 80-81). To situate all of this research in context, it’s worth noting that Ladson-Billings’s original article (referenced in both the Sadker and Aronson’s texts) was written in 1995. The two subsequent texts, written in 2010 and 2015, respectively, demonstrate that Ladson-Billings was one of the most influential and impactful scholars in the field of education.

One important distinction made by Aronson and Laughter is that, based on their interpretations of Gay and Ladson-Billings’s work, culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy are similar, yet, they ultimately target two different things. On the one hand, Gay was focused more on teaching “competency and methods” to determine what teachers should do in the classroom to be culturally responsive. Ladson-Billings, on the other hand, focused on the “attitudes and dispositions” of teachers which, once aligned with culture-first thinking, would positively influence their planning, instruction, and assessment (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). Obviously there are moments where these two schools of thought intersect, and, for the purposes of this capstone, I am choosing to focus on this connection as I explore how “attitude and disposition” (Ladson-Billings) and “competency and methods” (Gay) work in collaboration with employing culturally responsive teaching practices.

### ***What Makes a Culturally Responsive Teacher?***

Culture is always present in our lives, especially as we learn, so it’s crucial for teachers to understand this dynamic as they work to meet the needs of their students. Jeremy Elliot-Engel and Donna Westfall-Rudd nicely echo some of Geveva Gay’s

thoughts about the importance of culturally responsive teaching in their article, *What is a culturally responsive educator?* they emphasize the influence and impact of culture on student learning:

Daily as we enter the classroom we do not leave culture, history and context outside, it walks in with us, the teacher, and with each of our students. Culture is embedded in our very fabric, conscious and subconscious. A culturally-responsive educator acknowledges individuals have different backgrounds, different experiences, and that these experiences influence culture. (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2021, p. 13)

The first step in becoming a culturally responsive educator is recognizing that culture is all around us and that it plays a huge role in shaping who we are as individuals, what we believe in, and how we understand the world around us. For teachers, it would be foolish to ignore the plethora of culture that walks into your classroom on a daily basis. Lydiah Nganga et. al. make a connection to this concept in their article, *High school students of color in the U.S. speak about their educational experiences: Schooling, culture and pedagogy*. They believe that culturally responsive teaching is a student-centered approach designed to “identify and nurture students’ unique cultural strengths” while simultaneously promoting student success and improving their sense of cultural identity (Nganga et. al., 2021). Culturally responsive teachers emphasize student-centered approaches to learning because they give students ownership over their own learning while also providing them with meaningful opportunities for cultural learning and growth.

Sadker and Zittleman offer some great ideas for how teachers can prepare themselves, and their mindsets, to be culturally responsive:

As you prepare to teach, you may want to make an extra effort to move out of your familiar milieu and seek different views. The more views you hear, the more likely you will be able to appreciate different life experiences and develop attitudes that are accepting of people who at first glance may seem very different from you. (Sadker & Zittleman, 2010, p. 81)

To some this might be second nature, but, to others, especially new teachers who may have grown up in a traditional WASP community, learning to understand and empathize with multiple different perspectives could very well be a daunting task. A teacher's willingness to learn, however, goes a long way in the eyes of students and their families.

In fact, according to Sadker and Zittleman, teachers who desire to be culturally responsive will need to spend time improving and broadening their cultural knowledge. They remind us that even though teachers may have a base level of knowledge surrounding certain cultures and/or groups, that knowledge likely won't encompass all of the students in your classroom. Therefore, it's worthwhile for teachers to educate themselves about their students to better understand their cultures, traditions/customs, languages, and how those findings might impact their educational experience (Sadker & Zittleman, 2010). Mind you, this process is ongoing, meaning that teachers will continuously learn about their students' cultures as they develop relationships with them and their families. It's critical for teachers, then, to use the information they've gathered

to make meaningful connections between students' cultures, the classroom community, and the curriculum.

Elliot-Engel and Westfall-Rudd highlight some actions that culturally responsive teachers should take within their classrooms. Teachers should seek positive relationships with students and their families to better understand their fears, hopes, dreams, and expectations. They must also aim to create opportunities for learning within the context of culture. This could include community building, cooperative learning, or role playing activities. Additionally, teachers should focus on student-centered instruction because it allows students to be a part of a "collaborative learning process" that develops organically based on the learning needs and/or interests of the students. By playing the role of a facilitator, the teacher can serve as a mentor who helps guide students to form their own conclusions and understandings (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2021).

Richards, Brown, and Forde also offer some useful steps that teachers can take to become culturally responsive. Their focus, however, is more about what the teacher can do themselves (in relation to their own lives) to achieve this end. Teachers could: "Engage in reflective thinking and writing...explore personal and family histories...learn about the history and experiences of diverse groups...visit students' families and communities...develop an appreciation for diversity...participate in reforming the institution" (Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007, p. 65). The authors really place the onus on teachers to grow in their understanding, appreciation, and commitment to culture. Students are relying on their teachers to model positive cultural attitudes and behaviors in the classroom, therefore it's important for teachers to truly invest themselves into an exploration of their own culture.

## **Benefits of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally responsive teaching provides a number of benefits for students, teachers, administration, and the community. Student achievement and success needs to be the forefront of our mission as educators, and studies show that students respond positively to CRT practices. In their book, *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*, Donna Gollnick and Philip Chinn contend that culturally responsive teaching is critical to giving students a truly multicultural education: “This pedagogy affirms the culture of students, views the cultures and experiences of students as strengths, and reflects the students’ cultures in the teaching process” (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009, p. 380). Not only does this approach affirm student cultures, but it also integrates culture with the curriculum and gives students the opportunity to learn content *in conjunction with* culture. Teachers are charged with creating these learning opportunities within the classroom, and achieving that result requires planned, intentional, and culturally conscious instruction.

Creating a positive classroom community has a huge impact on students’ academic experiences as well as their overall success in school. Diversity is something to be praised, and it’s important that each student feels validated and celebrated for the unique cultures, languages, and personal experiences they bring to the classroom. In their academic journal, “Culturally Responsive Teaching in the 21st Century Inclusive Classroom,” Bridgie Ford, Denise Stuart, and Shernavaz Vakil assert that creating an inclusive learning environment is a valuable part of culturally responsive teaching: “Culturally responsive learning environments begin with teachers infusing a rich multicultural education that reflects the diversity in the classroom” (Ford, Stuart, & Vakil,

2014). An inclusive classroom makes every student feel safe, respected, and supported. Nganga et. al. agree with this notion as they make reference to a classroom built on respect: “In classrooms based on respect, all cultures are understood and appreciated, creating an inclusionary and culturally responsive education” (Nganga et. al., 2021, p. 16). This does not happen, however, unless teachers find ways to reflect students’ cultures within the classroom as well as their overall instruction. Moreover, it will require consistent effort to ensure that your students’ histories, cultural traditions, languages, etc. are not only validated and celebrated, but also represented in the curriculum you teach (Nganga et. al., 2021).

Teachers who effectively use CRT practices recognize the importance of intertwining culture and instruction. Ford, Stuart, and Vakil extend this idea to consider the role of culture in learning, but also its positive effects on the overall student experience:

Effective teachers need to realize the influence of culture on learning in students and enhance their opportunities for success by understanding their differences and incorporating practices that consider student preferences toward learning.

Recognizing the importance of culture in learning, culturally responsive teachers relate with learners not only by connecting with their students as individuals, but also understanding the cultural contexts influencing their interactions. (Ford, Stuart, & Vakil, 2014, p. 58)

Frankly, it’s very challenging to relate to the unique experiences and backgrounds of students, especially if the teacher does not come from the same social, economic, or cultural background. It requires work to make meaningful connections to students and

their cultures, because, oftentimes, teachers will have to spend time learning about different cultures and then find ways to incorporate them into their instructional designs.

Promoting student voice is another benefit of CRT because it encourages students to share their own prior knowledge and experiences with their classmates and teachers. Their insights can lead to fruitful learning moments, so it's crucial for teachers to create safe spaces and opportunities for students to share their thoughts. When teachers incorporate student voice into their instruction, it helps students to better understand the content because they're able to connect it to their own experiences and realities. Moreover, by actively listening, teachers can gauge students' prior knowledge and experiences in relation to a topic, idea, or concept and use that information to inform their future instructional strategies (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). The shift to more student-centered teaching approaches suggests that students have a lot more prior knowledge and personal experience than they've previously been given credit for. Teachers must learn to lean more on student knowledge and experience, thus encouraging students to be active participants in their own learning.

Teacher-student relationships also play an important role in the personal, social, and academic development of students. Using culturally responsive teaching within the classroom can help strengthen these relationships. According to Tyrone Howard's article, *Culturally relevant teaching: A pivot for pedagogical transformation and racial reckoning*, students respond well to a positive, genuine, and healthy teacher-student relationship: "The importance of relationships is vital because it speaks to an educator's willingness to know students and understand their interests, backgrounds, personal histories, families, aspirations, hopes and dreams" (Howard, 2021, p. 412). Students will

surely notice the efforts of a teacher who takes time to get to know them as individuals, supports their goals/dreams, willingly educates themselves about different cultures, and finds ways (in the curriculum, classroom, community, etc.) to make each student feel recognized for the qualities that make them unique.

### ***Professional Development***

Culturally responsive teaching lends itself to supporting the unique needs of diverse students because it connects their learning to culture, language and personal experience. Teachers need to be adequately prepared to utilize CRT in their classrooms. Teacher preparation programs as well as professional development training can really help educate teachers on how to use CRT in their own practice. Moreover, administrators can create a positive school (and community) culture by making significant efforts to train teachers on CRT. Teachers can (and should) be continuous learners when it comes to their cultural competency and understanding because there will always be room to grow and potential ideas to improve your teaching.

Sharroky Hollie, author of *Branding Culturally Relevant Teaching: A Call for Remixes*, believes there's still a sizable gap between "vision" and "reality" when it comes to fostering culturally responsive teachers and classrooms:

In my work with school districts across the country, I find that many of them are stagnated in their work around equity and/or cultural responsiveness... Why do we not have more culturally responsive classrooms from school to school, from district to district? (Hollie, 2019, p.38)

Therefore, in order to help close this gap and fully prepare teachers to embody culturally responsive teaching practices, teacher preparation programs and school districts



alike must devote substantial time and resources to professional development. Teacher preparation programs now take great strides to ensure their graduates are ready to meet the needs of culturally diverse learners. According to her article, *Assignment past due: Rooting educational systems in equity*, Kathleen Wallace explains some of the precautions taken by these programs to make sure preservice teachers are ready:

Preparing institutions have an obligation to assess formally whether preservice teachers are competent in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students. In keeping with this line of thought, a review of the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) that is widely used in the United States as a measure of teacher readiness is warranted. (Wallace, 2021, p. 48)

The edTPA that Wallace references is a great measurement tool for teacher preparation programs as well as prospective hiring districts to use to evaluate the readiness of a potential teacher candidate. It is an extensive timed test which requires teacher candidates to use pertinent information and knowledge to answer questions about teaching strategies, cultural responsiveness, and meeting the needs of diverse learners. Given that the edTPA is a culmination of everything a teacher candidate has learned (or, was supposed to have learned) during the program, it's understandable why it's held in such high regard.

There is a growing responsibility for school districts to provide professional development opportunities that are centered on culturally responsive teaching. In another one of her articles, Gloria Ladson-Billings suggests that current teachers need to be assessed in terms of how well they utilize culturally responsive practices and how well they meet the needs of diverse learners. She says in her article, *Teaching in dangerous*

*times: Culturally relevant approaches to teacher assessment*, that teachers have often been assessed using a portfolio in which they pick and choose examples of student work that best showcase student success as well as their skills as a teacher. Ladson-Billings seems to think this is not the most accurate way to measure a teacher's ability to use culturally responsive teaching:

Assessment of culturally relevant teaching practice would require teachers to show evidence of academic achievement for all their students or to provide educationally defensible explanations for why any students do not meet this criteria (e.g., consistently poor attendance records, high transience rates, identified special needs, nonprovision of special educational services). (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 259)

Another common method for assessing teacher performance has been using videotaped lessons which were subsequently reviewed by administration.

Ladson-Billings discounts that idea as well because she claims it offers “an artificial representation of teaching,” which, even unedited, “reveals but a partial view of the classroom setting and what transpires there” (Ladson-Billings, 1998). One can understand why a videotape might not convey the entire picture of what's happening inside a classroom. While it's plausible that portfolios and videotaping could be a component of professional development (perhaps if paired with some critical reflection and analysis) there is definitely a call for more direct and impactful professional development approaches for current teachers.

In their article, *Instructional supervision for culturally responsive teaching*, Stephen Gordon and Sara Espinoza argue that clinical supervision, when used in

conjunction with other professional development techniques, is a great method for evaluating a teacher's ability to use culturally responsive teaching. Gordon and Espinoza detail the four typical parts of a clinical observation as the preconference, observation, analysis and planning, and postconference (Gordon & Espinoza, 2020). These kinds of professional development opportunities allow for dialogue between the teacher and their supervisor both before and after the observation. The before meeting would highlight objectives and the overall lesson plan, while the after meeting would discuss the teacher's reasoning behind certain decisions, reflective evaluation of their performance, and identify areas for growth in the future.

Based on the current scope of research it's clear that there needs to be more of a focus on developing current and future teachers' culturally responsive teaching abilities. Acquiring these skills doesn't just happen overnight, so bringing teachers up to speed will require a commitment of time and energy from both the teachers and administration. Gordon and Espinoza believe there are a number of different professional development ideas that, when coupled with clinical supervision, can pay dividends for everyone. They write:

Professional development activities...can be carried out during in-house sessions or during field activities. In-house sessions can include review of disaggregated student achievement data, readings and videos followed by reflective dialogue, writing and sharing of cultural autobiographies, presentations by and interaction with diversity panels, review and critique of instructional materials, skill demonstration followed by practice with feedback, and role-plays and simulations. (Gordon & Espinoza, 2020, p.3)

A universal theme between all of these suggestions is that they involve hands-on learning, participation, analysis, and reflection on the part of the teachers. Many would argue that that is the best way to yield meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Having the chance to experience and perform the activities themselves prepares teachers to then model those same activities with their own classes. The whole point behind professional development is for teachers to leave with tangible ideas they can use in their own teaching to ultimately improve their students' achievement, educational experience, and cultural appreciation. By making a collective effort to educate teachers about culturally responsive teaching and how to effectively use it in their classrooms, schools are taking an important step towards fully meeting the academic, social, and cultural needs of each student.

### ***How Can You Incorporate CRT in ELA Classrooms?***

There are a number of different ways for English Language Arts (ELA) teachers to incorporate students' unique cultures, languages, and experiences into their everyday teaching. Culturally responsive teaching invites teachers to use student cultures, languages, and prior knowledge to make meaningful connections to the curriculum they're teaching. Sometimes, it can be difficult to get students engaged with ELA content. This is why activating students' prior knowledge is incredibly important for promoting student engagement. According to the text, *Reading and learning strategies: Middle grades through high school*, "a reader's prior knowledge, including experiences and attitudes, determines the ways in which new information is processed and understood...new information is assimilated more easily when it can be related to the reader's background" (Lanski et. al., 2003, p. 123). Student-centered approaches to

teaching will oftentimes inherently lead to the activation of prior knowledge. Teachers aim to create connections between the content and student backgrounds/experiences; these connections can assist students with making inferences and developing a better understanding of the content, which only helps to boost their comprehension and critical thinking skills in the process (Lenski et. al., 2003).

When it comes to literacy, it is important to give students opportunities to see themselves reflected in the literature they're reading. In the informative text, *Books like me: Engaging the community in the intentional selection of culturally relevant children's literature*, the authors argue that there is a cognitive benefit when students read texts that relate to their cultures, experiences, and identities: "A growing body of literature confirms that culturally responsive literacy instruction, including culturally accessible images and themes, promotes achievement among culturally and linguistically diverse learners" (Zygmunt et. al., 2015, p. 25). ELA teachers have to provide a wide variety of texts (perhaps in a classroom library) that will appeal to all of the students in their class. If a student still doesn't find a text that relates to them, then they must connect with the librarian and work together to find a book that fits that student.

Research shows that culture can be a powerful tool for learning. According to Natasha Chenowith's article, Culturally responsive pedagogy and cultural scaffolding in literacy education, students' cultural knowledge can be used as a "vehicle for learning" because their past experiences and histories act as a means for creating self-empowerment, confidence, and motivation while also helping them construct their own learning in the classroom" (Chenowith, 2014). This idea meshes nicely with a quote from a student in Books Like Me:

The joy of reading is in stepping into the experience of the characters. When the characters look like, talk like, think like, and act like us, it's easy to share in the experience...experiencing books that mirror our own lives is extremely important. (Zygmunt et. al., 2015, p. 26)

As previously mentioned, students play an important role in constructing their own learning. Kristin Kibler and Lindsay Chapman's text, *Six tips for using culturally relevant texts in diverse classrooms*, sheds light on this concept: "Rather than simply reading a multicultural text, teachers must engage their students in dialogue and support them in building critical literacy skills. In order for the text to be transformative...it must be interrogated from multiple perspectives" (Kibler & Chapman, 2019, p. 743). In order for fruitful learning to take place, especially in an ELA classroom, there needs to be a critical discussion that includes viewpoints from multiple different perspectives. The teacher is responsible for facilitating the discussion using guiding questions and/or general monitoring, but the students are really the ones conducting the conversation. Similarly, according to Jennifer Ervin's text, *Critically reading the canon: Culturally sustaining approaches to a prescribed literature curriculum*, student discussion is vital for students to be active participants in their own learning. She argues that classroom dialogue encourages students to "work through their perspectives" and reshape them based on "new understandings" that might emerge from the discussion. Students can use these new understandings to reflect on their own perspectives and consider why their position within specific communities might give them a unique perspective on the topic (Ervin, 2021).

Susan Bennett and company agree that there is extreme value in the discussions that emerge from multicultural texts. According to their journal, *Culturally responsive literacy practices in an early childhood community*, they suggest students can gain incredible insight into our society by using multicultural literature as the medium:

Multicultural literature also offers students the opportunity to examine the historical, sociopolitical, and economic contexts in which the story time frame is situated. The use of multicultural literature can provide a classroom environment for teachers to facilitate discourse that centers on race, social class, family structures, and diverse cultures where students share their realities, assert their perspectives, and learn about others. (Bennett et. al., 2017, p. 246)

Teachers strive to help students make connections between the work they're doing in school and real world application. ELA teachers are no different. They are teaching students to use reading, writing, communication, critical thinking, and analysis to make sense of the world they live in. Discussions using multicultural literature, especially when the material directly relates to students' lives, can be some of the most revealing, inspiring, and/or impactful moments in a child's education. These are the moments they remember long after they're done with school.

An excellent idea to embody culturally responsive teaching in relation to writing is to encourage students to write about cultures and perspectives that differ from theirs. This is a great strategy for teaching writing skills, but it also provides students with an opportunity to practice using empathy, kindness, and compassion. Enid Lee, Deborah Menkart, and Margo Okazawa-Rey put forth the idea of a "Portrait Poem" in their text,

*Beyond heroes and holidays : A practical guide to K-12 anti-racist, multicultural education and staff development:*

Students look at photographs of artwork from a particular period –the Harlem Renaissance, Chinese or Chicano labor history for example, to ‘read’ history and literature in a new way. This activity celebrates diverse cultural experiences.

Students may either describe what they see in the photo/painting or they may become the person in the painting and write from that person’s point of view.

(Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2008, p. 230)

Think about having this experience from a seventh grader’s perspective. Imagine getting the chance to practice your writing skills while doing something interesting, entertaining, and maybe even fun. ELA teachers are afforded this luxury, at times, when they can use activities such as this one to achieve multiple different ends. The opportunities to intertwine culture and a communication skill, whether it be reading, writing, speaking, or listening, are honestly almost endless. Doing activities like this on a regular basis is certainly possible, but it will require a lot of time and effort to put together. More often than not, these kinds of activities are not part of the “standard curriculum.” The challenge is determining whether or not the teacher’s school district is willing to give them the autonomy and flexibility to make changes to the curriculum so that they can create more meaningful learning experiences for their students.

### **Summary**

Based on the extensive literature review conducted in this chapter, it is evident that culturally responsive teaching is a widely debated topic in the field of education.

Future and current teachers alike are being taught how to use CRT in their classrooms in



an effort to make connections between students' cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences and the content they're learning in school. Placing emphasis on these connections is said to improve student achievement, student engagement, and the overall relationship between students, their teacher, and the school community itself. Teachers are charged with creating an inclusive classroom that allows each student to feel welcome, safe, and supported. Culturally responsive teaching lends itself to creating this type of classroom culture.

Professional development is a key component to preparing both preservice and active teachers to adequately meet the needs of their students. Culturally responsive teaching is an extremely important concept that all teachers need to be implementing in their classrooms. Regardless of how long a teacher has been teaching, or how well they claim to know/use CRT, there is *always* more to learn, new strategies to try, and room to grow. Teacher education programs are now working to prepare future teachers to be culturally responsive, and many school districts are offering professional development opportunities through in-service sessions and field activities to continue training current teachers who are already practicing. The good news is that there is clearly a collective effort to help students be more successful and ultimately provide them with a better overall education.

English Language Arts teachers have great opportunities to use culturally responsive teaching as part of their everyday classroom operation. The skills students learn in an ELA classroom are easily transferable to other contexts, making it relatively easy to incorporate culture, language, and/or personal experience into daily lesson plans. Students will consider multiple different perspectives through multicultural texts, images,

media, or commentary. The lasting impressions that students gain from considering another person's (or group's) perspective will help them develop an appreciation for culture, respect and empathy for others who are different from them, and the ability to critically examine the ways in which culture can influence a person's beliefs, behaviors, and world view.

Chapter Three will consider the necessity of teachers (future and current) using culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. Given that I am about to exit a teacher preparation program, I don't think it makes much sense to reinvent the wheel and come up with a presentation that will help educate future teachers about the importance of culturally responsive teaching. Teacher education programs are already doing that. Instead, I am creating a professional development seminar that will combine background information about CRT and its importance, with interactive experiences, discussions, small group work, and off-site activities that will make lasting impressions on current teachers. Participants will leave the session with a better understanding of CRT and its importance, but also with a list of tangible activities/resources (that they either learned about, saw in action, or participated in) that they'd like to try in their own classrooms someday.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Overview

In Chapter Two of this capstone project, I examined the importance of culturally responsive teaching and described the ways in which it benefits students' learning, relationships, and overall experience. Additionally, we took a closer look at how culturally responsive teaching can be used in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms as well as why it's critical for school districts and/or administrations to provide culturally responsive teaching (CRT)-specific professional development opportunities for existing teachers. The literature review revealed a need for creating the aforementioned professional development opportunities, and it also highlighted the importance of training teachers to be reflective, open-minded, and culturally responsive in their practice.

This chapter will continue to explore the research question: *What are the benefits of employing Culturally Responsive Teaching in ELA classrooms?* The goal of this research is to demonstrate the need for culturally responsive teachers as well as to provide relevant and meaningful professional development opportunities for ELA teachers that will properly prepare them to use CRT in their classrooms. Moreover, the purpose is to educate principals, administrators, and other school district officials with the power and resources to make this goal a reality.

It's worth noting that I am approaching my research project about culturally responsive teaching from a white, male, middle class perspective. While I may be able to attest to the experiences of a "stereotypical" white male, I know that I can't directly relate to the vast array of student cultures, languages, identities, and experiences that will be

present in my future classroom. Even though I can't directly relate, I can dedicate myself to learning more about my students' unique characteristics and find ways within the classroom to show them the respect, recognition, and empathy they deserve. My traditional, stable upbringing has sheltered me, in a way, from the reality of the world, specifically when it comes to understanding the challenging circumstances many people face. Culturally responsive teaching reminds us that every student's uniqueness is worth celebrating, and I will strive to demonstrate that each and every day in my classroom. I plan to commit to lifelong learning, especially when it comes to culture, so that I can provide my students with a multicultural education, create a positive learning experience/community, and model an appreciation and respect for the diversity that exists in our world today.

### **Project Design**

My project is to create a CRT professional development (PD) workshop designed specifically for ELA teachers. Ultimately, the goal is both to increase their knowledge (and confidence) surrounding CRT and leave them with tangible strategies, resources, and/or activities that can be used to teach (specifically) writing. The PD will consist of three consecutive work days, with each day being 180 minutes (or 3 hours). The first portion of Day One will begin with a presentation about culturally responsive teaching; more specifically, the presentation includes information about what CRT is, videos from accredited professionals (followed by discussions), frameworks that explain why CRT is so important and how it positively impacts students, and opportunities for participants to engage in some personal reflection as well as small group conversations. Handouts will

be provided for participants to use for reference and writing notes, but there will also be some discussion prompts provided via the powerpoint presentation.

The second half of Day One is centered around personal reflection, during which teachers will do some self-reflection about their own attitudes, mindsets, biases, and skills when it comes to teaching. Participants will begin by completing an activity from Teaching Tolerance called the “Common Beliefs Survey” which poses a number of difficult questions relating to race, culture, student experience, etc. Following each question is space for them to write about why they chose a certain answer. Then, once everyone is done, participants will discuss a series of prompted questions (via powerpoint) in small groups. The last portion of Day One will have participants working through handouts (questionnaires, activities, scenarios, etc.) that again have them doing their own personal reflection. Each handout will be explained, the participants will have time to complete them, and then there will be prompted questions that call for “think/pair/share” opportunities between colleagues.

Day Two of my PD workshop would involve participants doing both on-site and off-site work that teaches them about new cultures, engages them in eye-opening experiences (ones that their students might face every day), and/or connects them to the communities they serve. The primary focus of Day Two is to increase and develop teachers’ cultural competencies using different types of personal experiences. The first half of the day will be on-site activities. Participants will listen to and discuss podcasts from “Remaking Tomorrow” that talk about promoting equity in schools, among other issues. They will also analyze a CRT-specific scenario that lends itself to a powerful conversation about empathy and cultural understanding. Lastly, there will be a chance

(using a self-guided handout) to examine their own school's culture, and distinguish between what's working (to promote CRT and equitable learning) and what's not. Ideally, participants would brainstorm and suggest an action plan that could be used to make positive changes to the school's culture.

The second half of Day Two involves teachers going off-site to engage in culturally relevant experiences that immerse them in the communities they serve. Consider these like field trips, but for teachers, with the intention being growing their understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity. Since there will likely only be an hour and a half (or so) of time left, teachers will have the choice to either attend a local cultural event or museum, or volunteer to help their local community. There are obviously many options that teachers could choose. That being said, for the purposes of this project, I will provide an example of each (attending something or volunteering) to give the reader a sample of both experiences. Regardless of which option participants choose, each will have an agenda that guides them through the experience and invites them to consider certain questions, discuss takeaways, and think about how any new understandings and/or perspectives could translate to the classroom. Following their experiences, teachers will have some time to reflect and discuss things with their fellow colleagues. Reflection is a critical part of professional development, so I want to make sure to provide space for growth and new understandings to take place.

Day Three is geared towards English Language Arts as participants explore the ways in which CRT can be used to help teach writing. Similar to the first two days, Day Three will be broken down into two parts. The first half of the day involves teachers doing a series of small group activities that allow them to try out some of the CRT

techniques referenced earlier in the PD workshop. Think of this as their opportunity to see CRT in action. Teachers will complete an analysis of student writing, interactive journaling, and a cultural artifact writing activity. Additionally, there will be time set aside for small group discussions and reflections that consider the overall experience, effectiveness, and impact of these activities. They will all be facilitated by the powerpoint presentation. The benefit of the interactive portion of day one is that it allows teachers to participate in the activities they plan to use with their own students. This work will help them identify the strengths and weaknesses of the activities, observe how they will actually look in action, consider how well they embody CRT strategies, and reflect on their cultural impact from a student's perspective.

The second half of Day Three will have participants doing some collaborative research about tools and/or resources that ELA teachers could use to improve teaching writing. Groups will be given a list of preselected tools and resources. Together, they choose one and explore it. Their job is to familiarize themselves with the tool or resource enough that they could explain it to everyone else. They also must determine how the tool or resource lends itself to teaching writing and brainstorm ideas for using it to enhance ELA curriculums. Time will be provided for groups to share their findings with the large group. The goal is to give the participants a host of resources they can use to improve writing instruction, employ CRT in their classrooms, and ultimately support student needs.

### ***Audience***

There are really two target audiences for the CRT-specific professional development seminar: school administrators and ELA teachers. My decision to target

these two audiences stemmed from the desire to implement positive changes within school communities and classrooms. Culture has always existed in education, and it's critical that we never lose sight of that. We must always remember to prioritize and showcase the culture within our schools. Culturally responsive teaching places culture at the forefront of education, and seeing this approach in action during student teaching was what sparked my desire to create a project that could help replicate those experiences in other schools.

The first intention is to reach school principals, administration, and district officials to educate them about how important culturally responsive teaching is and why they should prioritize training their teachers to use it in the classroom. Creating a district-wide mindset that promotes culturally responsive teaching truly starts from the top and works its way down. That being said, it's crucial for district leaders to educate themselves about CRT, and wholeheartedly believe in the message they are sending to administration, principals, teachers, and students. If the district is on board with devoting time and resources to CRT-specific professional development opportunities; then, by extension, those opportunities should be provided to all of the necessary principals, administrators, and teachers in that district.

The second target audience for this project is English Language Arts teachers. More often than not, ELA teachers are bound by strict curriculums and meeting certain benchmark standards that afford them little room to be creative with the content they teach. Despite that, though, there are plenty of ways (for ELA teachers, specifically) to make the content they teach more accessible, engaging, and culturally relevant. This project is designed to provide ELA teachers with a number of culturally responsive



teaching approaches that can help them create a positive classroom community, provide opportunities within the curriculum to use and/or learn about culture, support writing instruction, and foster more meaningful learning experiences for students. My hope is that this project will showcase the benefits of culturally responsive teaching, generate district-level support for providing teachers with CRT-specific professional development opportunities, and encourage more ELA teachers to employ CRT strategies in their own classrooms.

### ***Setting & Timing***

I envision this project taking place during a typical teacher workshop week and/or district-wide professional development seminar. There is a huge benefit to doing this kind of training in large group collaboratives because it gives teachers the opportunity to learn about (potentially) new concepts, share ideas, learn from one another, and discuss teaching strategies they would like to use with their own students. Moreover, this project will ask teachers to engage with CRT practices and activities themselves, which will not only give them new ideas to use in the classroom, but it will also allow them to experience CRT from a student's perspective. Hands-on work is very insightful and reflective, in my experience, so that's why I decided to incorporate interactive features in my project.

Depending on how much flexibility a school district may have, my hope is that at least two and a half days of the PD would take place in a district-wide setting, while the other half day (2nd half of Day Two) is devoted to off-site experiences. The district-wide workshop component is relatively self-explanatory. All of the ELA teachers from a specific district (or school, if done on a smaller scale) would meet at a common place to

participate in a professional development workshop that consists of a presentation, small group collaboration, and engaging activities that reinforce the main ideas and concepts. The off-site experiences, then, would serve as a follow-up to the large group workshop. The purpose of these experiences is to teach the participants valuable lessons you simply cannot replicate during seminars or workshops.

The timing (and frequency) of these professional development opportunities would again depend on the resources available to the district. My goal would be three separate PD workshops, each with a large group, small group, and off-site component. Ideally, one would take place during teacher workshop week, another before or after winter break, and the last before or after spring break. This structure would give teachers multiple opportunities to learn about (and continue learning about) CRT, and encourage them to reflect, reevaluate, and potentially adjust their approaches based on the needs of their students.

### ***Rationale***

The rationale behind this project stems from the need for more culturally responsive teachers in today's classrooms. While there seems to be a collective push towards CRT being a staple in modern-day classrooms, as referenced by Ladson-Billings and Wallace in Chapter Two, there is still more that could be done to train teachers to integrate culture, language, and student experience into their everyday practice. I chose to draw on the ideas of Gordon and Espinoza who believe professional development can look a lot different than one might typically think. They argue that these workshops should no longer resemble teacher-centered instruction like lecture and note-taking.

Instead, they claim professional development should be more student-centered and involve a wide range of purposeful activities.

Gordon and Espinoza suggest teachers could use workshops to perform “review and critique of instructional materials, skill demonstration followed by practice with feedback, and role-plays and simulations” (Gordon & Espinoza, 2020, p. 3). They could also include engaging in reflective dialogue based on readings and/or videos, reviewing student data, or exploring and recognizing diversity by sharing your own cultural story (Gordon & Espinoza, 2020). Utilizing this approach would allow participants to make connections between students’ experiences and culturally responsive teaching. It would also help to develop their overall appreciation and understanding of culture, thereby better meeting the needs of their students as they find meaningful ways to incorporate culture into their instruction.

### ***Timeline***

This project will be completed during the summer semester (June - August 2022) at Hamline University as part of the coursework needed for my Capstone Project. In order for this project to come to fruition, I will be putting together a three-day professional development workshop which will involve a combination of background information, small group activities and/or discussions, and both on and off-site work. I believe my project addresses the need for ongoing professional development relating to CRT. My task will be to identify and present the most pertinent information about CRT, create small group activities and/or discussion questions that get participants engaging with CRT, and locate resources/opportunities that will support the growth of teachers’ cultural awareness, appreciation, and respect. Moreover, I want to provide ELA teachers

with a number of tangible ideas, resources, and tools they can use to employ CRT and support writing instruction.

### ***Assessment***

To determine the effectiveness of my project, teachers will revisit the ideas they learned from the PD a few months later. They will receive and complete the same “Common Beliefs Survey” as they did during the PD. This time, instead of only writing about why they answered the questions a certain way, they will be able to compare their new answers to their original answers and write about *why* (if at all) their answers may have *changed*. Those differences may indicate new understandings, perspectives, or attitudes that resulted from their experiences during the PD workshop. Redoing the initial survey is a great way for participants to reflect on their own growth as an educator and assess how well they’ve been able to implement culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms.

I will also create a jamboard as an additional follow-up tool that invites teachers to share how well CRT is going in their classrooms. This is a moment for teachers to share the successes and challenges they’ve had using culturally responsive teaching practices. It’s also a chance for teachers to learn about CRT strategies that have worked well for other teachers and discuss what they’ve done to incorporate culture into the classroom. Teachers would be able to post anonymously and even screenshot the jamboard if they’d like to keep it for later reference. I believe this follow-up will provide very valuable insight to those involved. Based on the results of redoing the “Common Beliefs Survey” as well as the follow-up jamboard, teachers will be able to reflect on

their own experiences with CRT, gain insight from their colleagues who've had success, and determine how well they're meeting the cultural needs of their students.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I detailed the CRT-specific professional development workshop for ELA teachers that I designed as a result of the literature review in Chapter Two. My goal is to continue to find research and evidence that will help answer my research question: *What are the benefits of employing Culturally Responsive Teaching in ELA classrooms?* School districts should continue to invest in their teachers, because in turn, their teachers will invest in their students. I hope that devoting time to culturally responsive teaching during professional development workshops will yield positive results for teachers, students, and their communities. I look forward to analyzing the results after my project is fully completed, implemented, and reflected on. Chapter Four will consider these results and offer my reflections on the whole process, my takeaways, and the goals I have moving forward.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Overview

The first three chapters of my capstone included a personal narrative which explained my educational journey and overall passion for creating this project, an extensive literature review of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as well as a detailed description of my professional development (PD) project and how it will be executed. The purpose of this work was to answer the research question: *What are the benefits of employing Culturally Responsive Teaching in ELA classrooms?* Chapter Four will discuss what I learned (both personally and professionally) from completing this capstone project, revisit the literature review, and analyze any implications and/or limitations of the PD project. Moreover, this chapter will consider and explore future research opportunities, examine the results of the project, and assess its overall benefit to the profession.

#### What I Learned

I have learned a lot of valuable things from this project that will serve me both personally and professionally as I continue my career. As a researcher, I have learned just how important it is to situate myself, and my contributions to the field, within the context of other notable authors. It's a worthwhile experience to read the work of prominent authors in the field of education, digest the information, and engage their ideas in my own way, coming from my own unique perspective. I've realized that no matter how far along I am in my academic career, researching will always be a necessary skill to have.

To be completely honest, as a writer, I haven't really learned anything that I didn't already know. I have always been a skilled writer. The writing process came extremely natural to me, too. I am also an English Language Arts teacher, so I think it's understandable why I didn't gain a whole lot from this project (writing wise). That being said, I did use this project to practice writing a Master's level paper (which is always useful), and also to hone my skills using the writing process, as there were ample opportunities to revise, peer edit, and work with a content expert. There's also no harm in practicing the art of writing in itself, either.

Lastly, I loved doing this project from a learner's perspective because, frankly, I just love opportunities to learn, especially when the topic is something I'm passionate about. It's even better when the finished product is something I can use in my career. I wouldn't say that it was unexpected learning, but I am always amazed at how relevant and impactful professional development workshops can be. Speaking from experience, I can attest that I have done some of my most meaningful growth during PD workshops. The firsthand experience you receive cannot be overlooked. I'm happy to know that the strategies, tools, and resources I provided will surely help some teachers out there, and that makes me proud.

### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

Throughout this capstone project I have been wrestling with two main ideas: **1)** what does it mean to be a "culturally responsive teacher," and **2)** why haven't we seen more teachers actually adopt CRT practices? It seemed like the further I looked, the more complicated the answer became. I was drawn to two important quotes that really guided my thinking during this capstone project. The first is from Jeremy Elliot-Engel and

Donna Westfall-Rudd's article, *What is a culturally responsive educator?* They perfectly encompass the idea that culture plays a pivotal role in student learning: "Daily as we enter the classroom we do not leave culture, history and context outside, it walks in with us, the teacher, and with each of our students. Culture is embedded in our very fabric, conscious and subconscious" (Elliot-Engel & Westfall-Rudd, 2021, p. 13).

If this is the case, and students have always brought their cultures, histories, and personal circumstances into the classroom, then why even focus on CRT at all? Teachers are obviously all using culturally responsive teaching strategies in their classrooms, right? Wrong. My question led me to Sharroky Hollie's article, *Branding Culturally Relevant Teaching: A Call for Remixes*, which also recognized the need for culturally responsive teaching to become more of a reality, to become mainstream:

In my work with school districts across the country, I find that many of them are stagnated in their work around equity and/or cultural responsiveness... Why do we not have more culturally responsive classrooms from school to school, from district to district? (Hollie, 2019, p.38)

After reading his article, I realized what I wanted my project to be. I wanted to help close the gap between "vision" and "reality" and ultimately see culturally responsive teaching become "the norm" in our schools. What can we do to make education more equitable and culturally responsive? Well, my thought was to begin by prioritizing teaching our teachers about why it's so critically important. As I mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, teacher education programs do a great job of preparing new teachers to be culturally responsive in their practice. My goal was to create something that could serve current teachers in all walks of their careers. The connections between these two quotes



and my own experience really put things in perspective for me. It became clear, thanks to the literature review, that significant efforts needed to be made to provide teachers with background, support, resources, and instruction on how to use CRT in the classroom.

### **Implications & Limitations**

The implications of my project tie back to the need for a collective push to be more inclusive, relevant, and culturally responsive in our schools and classrooms. Moreover, there is a responsibility for teachers to work to improve their cultural competences, take meaningful interest in the communities they serve, and be reflective practitioners as they aim to best meet the needs of their students. In relation to policy makers, I believe my project will shed light on the importance (and frankly, necessity) of providing CRT-specific professional development opportunities for teachers. Obviously, there is already language about culture, equity, inclusion, etc. that exists in these policies, but that doesn't mean that more explicit language about culturally responsive teaching couldn't be added as well. It's always extremely difficult to make changes at the policy level (especially in education), but, if my project even gets people thinking about doing it, then I'd consider it a success.

Conversely, the limitations of my project stem from the resources available to the different districts offering the PD workshop. In some cases, there might be limited access to the funding needed to carry out the workshop. Certain districts have more capital than others, which means administrators will likely have to choose which PD workshops are a must, leaving others (potentially like my project) to be pushed to a later date or left out altogether. In other cases, there might not be as much availability for culturally relevant off-site activities in certain areas compared to others. Things like population density, the

area's overall cultural diversity, and/or access to resources/capital could all impact what kinds of cultural experiences are available to the community. Now, it's still possible to make things happen with proper planning, but it would be important to connect with your district administrators and local community officials beforehand in order to avoid some of these potential limitations.

### **Future Research**

One interesting option for continued research would be to conduct a case study on a particular student or group of students and their families. If we're viewing this potential project through a culturally responsive lens, then how could a teacher use a deeper understanding of a student's family, culture, home and/or community environment to influence their instruction? What can teachers do to strengthen the connection between themselves and the communities/families they serve? I believe a case study would provide answers to these questions by allowing teachers to see their students "behind the scenes," so to speak. The takeaways and insights from a case study like this could help teachers better meet those specific students' needs in the classroom, and those findings could even be applied in other contexts to support other students' needs as well.

Another possible idea for a major project would be to assess the quality of the curriculum your district provides (in any subject area), and determine what needs to be done to make it more inclusive, relevant, and culturally responsive. This could include, but is not limited to, analyzing the curriculum to ensure there are representations from multiple cultural perspectives, making sure the curriculum is accessible and relevant to all students, or dissecting the activities and assessments within certain units to identify areas for improvement and design more culturally responsive content. Based on the

findings of my own project, I would argue that this idea is the most fruitful because its goal is to improve the quality and cultural competence of curriculums from the inside out. What better way to provide our teachers with the resources and support they need to be culturally responsive in their practice?

### **Results**

The best way to use the results of this project is to observe how teachers implement CRT strategies, understandings, and knowledge in their classrooms, and recognize the impact it's made on overall student learning. In addition to seeing CRT in action through amazing teachers, I think there is power in communication between staff, specifically when it comes to what's working and not working (CRT wise) in the classroom. The jamboard follow-up discussion will provide a clear picture about teachers' successes and failures using CRT. My hope is that teachers decide to continue coming back to discussions about CRT (whether it's through jamboard, Google docs, an in-person discussion, etc.) to help one another grow as educators. There is no better teacher than experience, so I would encourage teachers who are having major success in their classrooms to share it with their colleagues, because only together can we move towards an education that is universally culturally responsive.

### **Benefits to the Profession**

I am proud of the work I've done to bring this project to fruition. As I think back to the moment when I first learned about culturally responsive teaching, I remember how naive and uninformed I was as a soon-to-be educator. Student teaching opened my eyes to what I can only describe as a "culture shock" as I slowly stripped away my own biases, expectations, and assumptions about what teaching in today's world really looked like.

My experience not only made me become more culturally competent as a human being, but it also helped me develop a deep appreciation for being a reflective educator. It's only by reflecting the mirror upon ourselves that we can truly change and grow in our profession. I have a responsibility to ensure that all of my students feel culturally represented, academically/emotionally supported, and personally valued and respected in my classroom.

My goal with this project was to replicate my own experience for other teachers like me who were new to the profession. The more I thought about how this project would look, the more I realized that the content would benefit *all* teachers (and relevant staff), despite only being geared towards ELA teachers. Whether it's their first or twentieth year, teachers have an obligation to understand and recognize how important culture is to education. Professional development workshops provide low-risk opportunities for teachers to learn about new concepts, discuss ideas, and talk through challenging and/or controversial topics that might otherwise be difficult to navigate. I hope anyone who participates in my PD workshop leaves with at least one meaningful takeaway that directly improves or impacts how they teach. If I can accomplish that, then I'll know I've succeeded in creating a valuable resource that helped benefit the profession.

### **Summary**

Culturally responsive teaching is an extremely important part of providing students with a multicultural education. Teachers owe it to themselves, and their students, to seek out professional development opportunities which will help them grow as educators. Moreover, they should actively work to improve their understanding of

diversity, cultural competence, and build meaningful relationships with students, their families, and the community. Teachers make more of a difference in the lives of students than they even understand, and it's satisfying to know that my project will help contribute to some of these successes.

All in all, this project has taught me so much about the kind of teacher I want to be. Students deserve to feel like their own unique cultures are interwoven with their education, and I will strive to make that a reality for every student that walks through my door. CRT is more than just getting to school each day and choosing to be culturally responsive. It takes a continued commitment to growing your own cultural knowledge, checking your own biases, privileges, and assumptions as you teach, and reflecting on your own practice to ensure you're consistently meeting the needs of your students. If you always hold yourself to that standard, then the rest will figure itself out.

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