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COURAGE UNDER FIRE:
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN A DIVISIVE TIME

By
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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University
St. Paul, MN
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DEDICATION

To those fighting for a better world,
those teaching others to fight,
and those we fight for.

EPIGRAPH

"How many years has it taken people to realize
that we are all brothers and sisters and human beings
in the human race?"

- Marsha P. Johnson

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”
-Maya Angelou*

Introduction

Since the introduction of Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995) seminal work on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, teacher education programs have embraced a focus on student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, which requires teachers to confront the status quo and purposefully address the rationale, motive, and potential bias behind their work in the classroom. While this work has widely been accepted as best practice (with updates to the terminology and focus including culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy), it has come under significant scrutiny in recent years. Teachers are finding it difficult to orient themselves between the idealism of their educational beliefs and the reality of their communities and school districts.

In an effort to provide educators with a better understanding of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in the face of increased opposition, the following seeks to answer the question: *How can educators create culturally responsive and sustaining classrooms and curriculum that best reflect students while navigating the rapidly changing public perception of cultural relevance in the classroom?*

The remainder of this chapter will deal with the rationale behind the work to be done, addressing the questions of “why now?” and “why me?” as it pertains to the focus of this capstone project. It will provide context for the current social/political climate and its correlation to my personal experience regarding the problem at hand.

Rationale

Within the last twenty years, teacher education programs have asked their teacher candidates to examine education through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers are taught to embody the ideals of creating inclusive and representative communities in their classrooms so that they can best support, nurture, and grow every student. From diversifying content to practicing restorative justice to creating safe spaces for all students, teachers are tasked with celebrating diversity, striving for equity, and creating a space of inclusion in their classrooms.

With educators like Emdin (2015), German (2021), and Hammond (2015) as guides, it has become common practice to look at our education system and consider it anew. What biases, explicit and implicit, are present in our work? Who is missing from the conversation? How are students seeing themselves in their work? Why has something “always been done that way” and when is it time to change that status quo? Teachers have been taught to ask these questions in an effort to change education for the better so that it can reflect and celebrate all of its students.

Delivering on these ideals comes with its challenges—examining curriculum and structures in our classrooms, purposefully and thoughtfully addressing inequities in our schools, changing our own practices and helping others learn—and has become even more difficult in recent years. As educators have put in the time and energy to implement culturally sustaining pedagogies in their schools, the work has brought its own controversies—and confrontations—into the classrooms.

Pushback to these inclusive practices, which has been incorrectly identified as Critical Race Theory (CRT), has become increasingly common in the last decade. CRT is an idea that race is a socially constructed tool used to oppress minorities, especially people of color, and is inherent in the nation's laws and legalese, creating and maintaining inequalities between people (Encyclopedia Britannica 2016) Parents, community members, and legislators have taken up what they see as a fight against CRT in the classroom and this loud group of detractors has made significant strides in limiting inclusive practices in the classroom: "Since January 2021, Republican state legislators have introduced nearly 200 anti-critical race theory bills in 40 states...these bills have created a chilling atmosphere for teachers who may decide to avoid discussing race, identity and contemporary issues in the classroom altogether, rather than risk their jobs" (Johnson et al., 2022, para. 5).

For many in the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and others) communities, the line between representation and what some consider indoctrination seems to largely be drawn by those who want to keep less commonly recognized social issues—often those of importance to marginalized communities—out of the classroom. The clashes around topics like antiracism, bias, privilege, gender identity, and sexuality have been particularly brutal:

We see...many bills requiring teachers to report to parents if their children are asking questions about their gender identity, and...it really puts teachers in an impossible situation. In a contemporary high school or middle school...these sorts of topics arise. [It] put[s] LGBTQ teachers in a really difficult situation where they're forced, essentially, to disguise their identity or the status of their relationships in order to fend off running afoul of these bills. (Gross, 2022, para. 12)

As political and social tides change, there has been more aggressive pushback on the work of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which has been considered essential and best practice by many educators for years. Through my research, I examine the rise of culturally sustaining pedagogy, its early reception and implementation, and the subsequent shift in the response to the changes brought about by these educational standards. I explore the history of these practices in relation to public opinion to help my fellow educators navigate the increasingly difficult minefield of the very basic and essential task of making our classrooms inclusive and representative of our students.

Having been through an experience where I attempted to increase the representation of marginalized groups in my own school, there are three things that would have been valuable to me that I hope to provide for other teachers as part of the capstone project:

1. A reminder of *why* culturally sustaining pedagogy is important and the impact it can have on students and our learning communities.
2. Knowledge of teachers who are going through the same struggles and blowback from doing the good work of building inclusive and representative communities.
3. Guideposts for navigating the confrontations that can arise from doing this work.

I believe that looking at how we got to where we are in education today will help us navigate where we need to be going and what we need to do to get there. Getting to the point where this capstone can become a reality came at great personal expense to me, but

the journey provided an invaluable lesson and ignited a passion that will stay with me for the remainder of my career.

Context

As we transitioned to online learning at the height of the pandemic, I worked with a group of teachers to put on a daily morning show for our school. Our goal was to provide community, connection, and fun for students while we were learning remotely. My segment was called “Person of the Day” and each morning I would provide a three minute spotlight on a different individual of note. Throughout my tenure on the show, I tried to use my platform as a way to celebrate diverse voices and perspectives, focusing the daily message on hope, positivity, and ways to grow in our own lives.

After the first few shows had run, I started taking recommendations from our middle schoolers to better center the segment on student voice. Soon, I had requests for people from Dolly Parton to John Lewis to Mr. Beast to Madame CJ Walker, and one request for Marsha P. Johnson, a black, transgender gay rights activist and drag queen. The student expressed that it would be important for gay, questioning, and nonbinary students to see someone like them on the morning show. I agreed and told the student I would add Marsha to the list.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I knew of Marsha’s work and what it meant for my own rights and voice. Therefore, I knew that there were parts of her life that some might find controversial (especially in the community where I was teaching). For months I grappled with how I could present Marsha in my segment, telling myself I could establish my segment and that, then, there would be a “right time” to present. As it

turned out, Marsha kept getting pushed down the list in favor of, quite frankly, easier people to spotlight.

As the weeks went on, the student who requested Marsha would check in, wondering when she was going to appear on the show. On several occasions, the student came to my classroom to ask if I was ever going to highlight Marsha. When I said she was “on the list,” the student would deflate in front of me, their excitement and confidence physically leaving them. Watching the impact my choice had on this student and the dejection of someone who had confided in me, trusted me, and looked to me to represent them and their classmates destroyed me. I was repeatedly letting them down and we both knew it. I was, and still am, ashamed of myself.

I was too afraid of people’s perceptions to put someone like Marsha P. on the morning show. I was too afraid of my own voice to celebrate someone like me on the morning show. I was too afraid of potential controversy to show my students someone like them on the morning show. My inaction spoke volumes to that student. I was simultaneously not living up to my own values and letting this student down. I let them believe their voice did not matter, that our school wasn’t a place for voices like ours, and that an openly gay teacher couldn’t be the ally they needed.

Eventually, the “right time” did present itself. In February, we were tasked by the district with celebrating Black voices on the morning show in honor of Black History Month. It felt like a welcome opportunity to highlight a Black figure in a marginalized community and, because I was aware of my surroundings, I worked to create a narrative that would present Marsha in a positive, unbiased and uplifting way.

There are figures in our curriculum and daily work that have horrific histories and questionable pasts, but we still acknowledge their contributions, even if we don't examine their flaws. Given the climate of the district where I worked, I crafted my message carefully, trying to toe the line between what I knew some might consider controversial (Stonewall Riots, prostitution, gender identity) and Marsha's contributions to the gay rights movement. Because Marsha is lauded as a leader and voice in the movement for equality, a value the district says it supports, I focused my message on community and inclusivity, believing that the positive contributions she made to the larger conversation around equity outweighed some aspects of her past. I wrote Marsha's segment the same way I wrote every other segment: addressing the larger, human lesson we can learn (grace, acceptance, perseverance, struggle, joy), focusing on what we can take away to be better versions of ourselves, and how those lessons might help us become more engaged and informed citizens.

After my segment, I received multiple messages and remarks of thanks and relief from students, parents, and staff. Students let me know that they have never felt seen or heard in our district because they are gay. They told me seeing someone who was like them went a long way in affirming their self worth. Parents and staff mentioned that seeing someone like Marsha when they were in school would have been an important moment in opening up a dialogue about people who are not like them. The immediate response was overwhelmingly positive because many believe that honoring Marsha P. Johnson was living up to the district's mission and values and honoring a commitment to excellence and belonging through diversity, equity, and inclusion. I got to see, firsthand,

why we are taught to build inclusive, reflective spaces; I witnessed the difference representation can make and it was amazing.

Not long after the segment aired, however, my world exploded. I found out that a parent had recorded my segment and sent the clip to the conservative media and counter-cultural outlet *The Daily Wire*. A staff writer attacked my choice and framed it as “show[ing] 11-to-13-year-olds a video...praising a transgender activist and sex worker” (Clark, 2021, para. 1) and made reference to other people they felt were problematic on the morning show: “The teacher’s...videos have highlighted other controversial figures. In the past few months, the videos have included Greta Thunberg, Vice President Kamala Harris, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and known communist Angela Davis.” (Clark, 2021, para. 6). *The Michael Knowles Show* picked up the story for a podcast episode and the associated video posted to YouTube amassed 44,000 views and almost a thousand comments.

The backlash was incredible and the voices that would undermine and detract from the work of inclusivity and representation were given credence by the school district’s lack of response. The angry, hurtful voices who demanded I be fired and called me immoral and repulsive. The disgusting, vitriolic voices who called me a pedophile and a predator. The violent, threatening voices who wanted to drag me from my home and beat me, or put me in a detention center, or teach me a lesson at the end of a gun.

The silence from the district sent a clear message to our students, staff, and community. That our school was not a safe place for minority voices and that it was dangerous to have conversations about controversial topics. That our marginalized students—in this case, specifically LGBTQ+ students—could not count on those in

power to condemn hateful speech and malicious actions. That our district had failed to honor our right to exist with dignity and pride.

This moment was a realization of my worst fears. I was afraid of what it meant to be myself, to exist, as an out gay teacher in that district. I was afraid that if I showed my students it was safe to be out and proud, that we could celebrate our identity, this would be the outcome. And, while my fears were valid, some amazing things happened because a student forced me to do better for my marginalized students. People woke up, got loud, and got to work.

Groups that had been pushing for increased focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the district mobilized and conveyed the message that the district could not continue to ignore its marginalized groups. Community members started having discussions about who we wanted to be as a district and what it meant to support *every* student we serve. Parents were having conversations with their students about values and beliefs, while examining how we treat those who are different from us. Staff sought out ways to increase inclusivity in their classrooms and many asked how to better listen to and support their marginalized colleagues and students. And all of this gave rise to a personal passion that would ultimately become this capstone and will fuel me throughout my career.

I want to use this project to remind myself how much diversity, equity, and inclusion matters and that, despite the change in perception over the last 10 years, the value of this work is incalculable. As someone who grew up questioning his sexuality in a small midwestern town with little-to-no hope of seeing people like me celebrated or even acknowledged, I know how much this matters. As someone who weathered the

backlash caused by providing his students with the representation a young me so desperately needed, I know how much this matters. As someone who witnessed the conversation sparked by Marsha P. Johnson in a community I never expected to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion, I know how much this matters.

I want to use this project to highlight the voices of those who are doing the work and who are living up to the values of inclusion and representation in their classrooms. I hope to celebrate the successes of educators who are doing this crucial work and commiserate with the setbacks and losses of educators who are struggling in situations similar to my own. I want to remind teachers why our education programs focused so intently on culturally responsive pedagogy and help them navigate the often-treacherous, but ever-critical work of helping our students be seen and heard.

And, most importantly, I want to use this project to show students that they matter. I want every student—especially our marginalized BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students—to see themselves reflected in their work and in their community. I want students to know that their voice is important and that they have every right to use that voice to celebrate their identity at school.

Chapter Summary

All of this culminates in my passion for the focus of this capstone project: addressing the rise of inclusive classrooms and the reactionary pendulum swing of public opinion. Regardless of current perceptions, students deserve to be whole partners in their learning experience, from seeing themselves reflected in their work, to examining others' opinions and evaluating their own, to engaging with their communities. Using my personal experience as a guidepost for this examination will provide focus for the

research and inform the goals of the project. The project takes the form of professional development for teachers (current and future) and uses the history of culturally responsive teaching, its importance, and the struggles of engaging in this work in the classroom to inform its focus and scope.

The following chapter will provide literary review examining the rise of culturally sustaining pedagogy and historical acceptance and/or rejection of the values associated with it. It will address the question: *How can educators create inclusive classrooms and curriculum that best reflect students while navigating the rapidly changing public perception of cultural relevance in the classroom?* Subsequent chapters will provide comprehensive descriptions of the project and reflection on the outcomes and future goals associated with the capstone.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

“One of the goals of education is not simply to fill students with facts and information but to help them learn how to learn.” -Zaretta Hammond

Introduction

The following literature review seeks to address the question: *how can educators create culturally responsive and sustaining classrooms and curriculum that best reflect students while navigating the rapidly changing public perception of cultural relevance in the classroom?* Because this Capstone focuses on the importance of culturally responsive work, its impact, and reception, the literature review is divided into three main sections: background/history, why it matters, and climate.

Part one of the review details the history of culturally-based pedagogies. Understanding the evolution and different iterations of these pedagogies is crucial in assessing their impact, particularly for traditionally marginalized students in the BIPOC and LGBTQ communities. This section will examine the development of ideals for acknowledging, celebrating, and sustaining student culture to more holistically address student needs, support student learning, and foster student growth.

The next section examines the outcomes of using culturally responsive practices in the classroom. It will specifically analyze case studies and research to demonstrate the positive effects for students working with teachers who engage in culturally responsive teaching. This section also serves as a lead-in and response to the final section regarding the social, political, and cultural shift in perception of culturally responsive teaching. Proving why culturally responsive teaching matters is even more important in the face of forceful opposition to these practices.

The final section provides context for the current climate around culturally-based classroom work within the United States. This section largely focuses on the social and political response from parents and legislators (through rhetoric and laws) to what they consider threats to “traditional values.” Understanding the realities of the political landscape around culturally responsive pedagogy is crucial for the context of this Capstone.

History/Background

Various iterations of asset-based pedagogies have developed over the years, each enhancing and adding to the work that came before, as the educational conversation adapts and changes over time (Milner, 2011). From Gloria Ladson-Billings’ introduction of culturally relevant pedagogy (1995) to Geneva Gay’s culturally responsive teaching (2000) to Django Paris and Samy Alim’s culturally sustaining pedagogy (2017), ideals of centering learning around and celebrating student culture have come to the forefront of pedagogical practice. These theories have been offered out of a necessity to work against the prevalent white, middle-class values and expectations that have largely become the unspoken standard in state-sanctioned education, which often forces minority students to lose connection to—or even deny—their languages, cultures, and traditions in favor of achieving in schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). Each new addition to the philosophy of culturally relevant pedagogy strengthens the ideals present across its iterations. These iterations “change, adapt, recycle, and recreate instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity” (Paris & Alim, 2017, pp. 154-155.)

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

While examining the underperformance of African American students in schools, Ladson-Billings (1995) identified qualities and consistencies among successful teachers and came to identify their practices as culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings argued for this type of teaching to be at the center of academic success for—specifically African American students in her study, but not limited to—students who are underserved by the public school system.

Ladson-Billings' observations led to the three main components of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: (a) focus on student learning, (b) development of students' cultural competence, and (c) support of students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant teaching demands and reinforces academic excellence in student learning and requires teachers to engage with their students' academic needs in an authentic way. Developing cultural competence asks teachers to build student facility to recognize and appreciate their own culture and, at the same time, learn about and become fluent in at least one other culture. Essentially, it uses one's own culture and interaction with the cultures of others to learn and experience new things. This critical consciousness allows students space to engage with the world and others in a critical and productive way (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings' framework asks students to develop skills to critique the cultural norms, values, and institutions that create and sustain cultural inequities.

In a case study of engagement in urban English classrooms, Adkins-Coleman (2010) found that teachers utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy saw a variety of success indicators in their classrooms. By building structured learning spaces that acknowledged

and celebrated student culture, classrooms became environments with motivated students who felt free to ask questions and participate in the classroom activities . These outcomes are supported by a similar analysis of H. Richard Milner who identified that the success of culturally relevant pedagogy stems from “the idea...that teachers create learning environments where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate...in the multiple discourses available in a learning context by not only consuming information but also through helping to deconstruct and to construct it” (Milner, 2011, p. 3).

The idea that culture “involves every aspect of human endeavor, including thought, perceptions, feelings, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160) is central to the holistic approach of addressing students through their culture. Due to the all-encompassing approach of valuing, celebrating, and examining learning through culture, it is critical for both students and teachers to engage meaningfully in the work together. As Ladson-Billings has reflected on her work, she has come to include the critical role of the teacher in working to study and understand the cultures they choose to incorporate into their teaching (Parish & Alim, 2017).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Building on the work of Ladson-Billings and others, Geneva Gay developed a pedagogical theory with similar aims. Culturally responsive teaching uses 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” (Gay, 2000, p. 204). Asserting that teachers should be teaching “to and through” the strengths of their students, Gay argues that culturally responsive teaching—much like its

predecessor— should both validate and affirm student culture (Gay, 2000). Where Ladson-Billings outlines three areas of focus, Gay expands into broader characteristics in which culturally responsive teaching:

- acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.
- builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities
- uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.
- teaches students to know and praise their own and each others' cultural heritages.
- incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (Gay, 2000).

Gay's practice also emphasizes the teacher-student relationship in modeling unbiased and culturally considerate thought processes and behaviors, which in turn allows students to build their critical thinking skills as they work with people who may be different and think differently from themselves (Gay, 2010).

Teachers who engage in this work successfully build environments where students explore their strengths in collaboration with the teacher, and then participate in the decision making process to set their own goals (Adkins-Coleman, 2010). This idea of collaboration also extends beyond culturally responsive teaching and into other ideas like

the focus on culturally considerate schools outlined by Anderson and Davis (2012). Anderson and Davis build on the importance of collaborative interactions outlined in culturally responsive teaching, stressing that these relationships are built between like-minded individuals, but who may have “conflicting agendas...heritage, history, circumstances, and affiliations [that] are distinct and divergent from one another” (Anderson & Davis 2012, p. 4).

Another educator working within the framework of culturally responsive teaching is Zaretta Hammond. Hammond takes her work beyond theory and observation, drawing connections between the benefits of culturally responsive teaching and the neuroscience of what happens to students’ brains when they are engaged in these environments. Hammond addresses the tools students need to build determination and grit and argues that culturally responsive teaching is capable of stimulating the neuroplasticity of the brain, thereby growing the brain, and ultimately helping students think in more sophisticated ways and at higher levels (Hammond, 2015).

Hammond’s approach to culturally responsive teaching is similar in many ways to Gay’s: educators must be able to identify and recognize students’ cultural modes of meaning making, use that cultural knowledge to scaffold student learning to connect prior knowledge to new ideas, and building social-emotional connections with students to create safe learning environments (Hammond, 2015). Hammond’s “Ready for Rigor Framework” (2015) outlines conditions that mirror those of previous pedagogies: awareness (particularly a variety of elements tied to cultural awareness), learning partnership (student-teacher relationship), information processing (using culture to

establish new cognitive routines), and learning environment (safety, rituals, collaboration).

Where Hammond goes beyond this framework, however, is to connect neuroscience to culturally responsive teaching. Hammond analyzes these core ideas and their correlation with the structure/duties of the brain and its chemical responses.

Culturally responsive teaching takes the next steps in its evolution through Hammond's "Culturally Responsive Brain Rules" that state:

- the brain seeks to minimize social threats and maximize opportunities to connect with others in community (the brain's two prime directives are to stay safe and be happy)
- positive relationships keep our safety-threat detection system in check (oxytocin produced by positive relationships triggers the amygdala to stay calm and allows the prefrontal cortex to focus on higher order thinking)
- culture guides how our brain processes information (memory and social engagement systems build neural pathways and help neurons fire to help make ideas "sticky")
- attention drives learning (our reticular activating system filters information through novelty, relevance and emotion, which in turn are interpreted through our cultural lenses)
- new information must be coupled with existing funds of knowledge in order to be learned (the limbic brain creates schema that operate as background knowledge we can pull from)

- the brain physically grows through challenge and stretch, expanding its ability to do more complex thinking and learning (growth is stimulated when we learn something new, engage in a complex task, or complete a puzzle) (Hammond 2015).

Hammond extrapolates on the theories of culturally relevant and responsive teaching to provide context and clarity around the pedagogy. Her focus on the how and why of culturally responsive teaching and its effects on the brain demonstrates the importance of the work in ensuring safe and productive spaces that reflect and engage with all students' cultures.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In their book *Culturally sustaining pedagogies : Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*, Paris and Alim offer “loving critiques” of the work done by Ladson-Billings, Gay, and others around culturally-based pedagogy. In their examination, they focus on the scholarship and implementation of asset pedagogies in three main ways: (a) extending on previous work to reject deficit approaches to education (b) addressing pedagogies that look at the history of communities of color without accounting for the rapidly-changing shifts in modern culture, (c) attending to pedagogies that do not go far enough to address problematic characteristics of some cultural practices (Paris & Alim, 2017). Ladson-Billings sees the work of Paris and Alim as picking up where the “beat drops” in her own work as they layer multiple parts of the varied pedagogies into something new (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Much of culturally sustaining pedagogy stems from the need to shift the perspective that students' culture, language, and literacy are deficits to overcome in favor

of the “demanded and legitimized dominant ways of schooling” (Paris & Alim, 2017). Race and racism today are often so subtle that, without careful consideration, we fail to see how “racialized practices and beliefs influence institutions and relationships” (Rolón-Dow 2005), and are therefore blind to the necessary inroads that need to be made to support students of color. Paris & Alim (2017), like Ladson-Billings and Gay, believe it is important for educators to center the practices of communities of color, but they take the theory further to argue that this centering of student culture is crucial in shaping the access to power structures and institutions in our nation.

Paris & Alim (2017) also consider it crucial in culturally sustaining pedagogy to examine, challenge, and push back against negative and regressive cultural practices (like homophobia, misogyny, internalized racism). As culture changes over time, teachers and students must be vigilant in their critiques of cultural norms and expectations to build on knowledge within communities of color that promote equity. Paris & Alim acknowledge that culturally sustaining pedagogy requires revising and adjusting as cultures change and shift, and consider the work as part of the project of cultural justice.

At its core, Paris & Alim argue that culturally sustaining pedagogy is crucial in maintaining student access to and analysis of their and others’ cultures. In this way, they posit that culturally sustaining pedagogy fosters cultural pluralism, leads to social transformation, and sustains and perpetuates the lifeways of communities who have been traditionally marginalized, damaged, and erased through the United States school systems.

Many other theories, research, and studies have contributed to the importance and impact of culturally responsive teaching, critical/ethical care, and moving toward equity

in the classroom. Anderson & Davis (2012) based their work on culturally considerate schools around these ideals, acknowledging that success in the work can only be achieved through equity. Christopher Emdin (2015) extols the efficacy and importance of culturally sustaining classrooms' work toward representation in how it considers the culture of their students and working to understand both the physical and emotional spaces of their students. Rolón-Dow's (2005) work on critical care—which will be examined in the next section—relies on understanding, celebration, and interaction with students' culture as teachers work together with students to examine their perspectives on ethnicity, gender, and social class play out in their lives.

Summary and Beyond

Each of these philosophies and pedagogies repeatedly return to a similar idea: students are best-served when classrooms are representative of, and responsive to, the individual cultures, lives, and experiences of their students. This means teachers must be willing to engage students where they are at and put in the work to celebrate and sustain the identities of their students in and out of the classroom

The next section will take the frameworks discussed in this section and demonstrate the impact of classrooms engaging in this work. It will also examine the shifting demographics within the United States to help build context for this work and explain why it has become increasingly critical to examine existing frameworks and identify areas of change.

Why It Matters

The American population is changing. In 2019, nearly four in 10 Americans identified themselves as a race or ethnic group other than white and, for the first time, over 50% of citizens under the age of 16 identified as a racial or ethnic minority (Frey, 2020). Five years earlier, U.S. public schools crossed the threshold where students of color were the majority for the first time (Paris & Alim, 2017). These trends continued over the last decade and, as a result, over a quarter of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the United States have minority-white populations (Frey, 2020).

The cultural makeup within the United States is shifting away from the white-dominated baby boomer culture that typified the latter half of the 20th century, meaning that the largely white, middle-class expectations that have dominated classrooms no longer suit the students they are supposed to be serving (Frey, 2020). The reality is that, for many students of color learning in environments that have not changed to reflect the reality of their diversified stakeholders, much of the day can be spent in the policing of their bodies to conform with typical “white norms” instead of being engaged meaningfully and intellectually with the content (Will, 2022).

Because the future of the United States is a multihued, multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic one (Frey 2022, Pars & Alim 2017), it is important to identify ways to authentically enact culturally sustaining pedagogies for students, but specifically for those students who have had their realities damaged or erased through the current educational environments (Montero 2019). Many educational researchers have reinforced the importance and impact of culturally responsive teaching by demonstrating that, in

classrooms where culturally responsive pedagogies are being successfully enacted, student voice, relationships, and sense of belonging are positively impacted.

Impacts in the Classroom

Examining a science teacher at an urban middle school for 19 months, Milner (2011) set out to assess culturally relevant practices in the classroom to determine the key elements that make the pedagogy effective. Focusing on cultural competency—a key tenet of Ladson-Billings’ pedagogy—Milner (2011) determined that culturally relevant teaching was taking place in the classroom and its impacts on relationships, racial awareness, and overall classroom climate, were clear. Milner (2011) highlighted cultural congruence between a diverse group of learners and their teacher, citing the teacher’s focus on developing his cultural competence and working to deepen his understanding of both his own culture (and privilege) and his practices within the context of the classroom. This awareness helped the teacher identify and confront matters of race and identity with his students, which in turn helped create and maintain authentic relationships. As a result, teacher and student were able to learn from and with each other. This in turn led to the classroom becoming a space for community and collaboration, with high expectations from the teacher for his students and, conversely, high expectations and engagement of students for their teacher (Milner 2011).

Supporting the idea that culturally relevant practices benefit students in the classroom, a study conducted by Kumar et al (2015) showed a 30% increase in the level of teacher expectations for their students’ academic mastery. This increase, they posit, could be attributed to the culturally relevant practices being implemented in the classrooms they observed. Teachers came to expect more from their students because

they had invested the time to build relationships and practice skills with students that were necessary to achieve the highest standards in their work. In both cases, culturally relevant teaching led to positive outcomes for students and increased involvement from educators.

Another study by Niholm & Alm (2010) examined feelings of inclusivity in a classroom of elementary students. Their findings are congruent with Milner and Kumar et al. in noting that the practices required for being culturally relevant are crucial to students feeling engaged and included. Their findings determined that culturally responsive classrooms create an inclusive environment by creating a learning community where differences are valued, individuals' rights and needs are taken into account, and feelings of belonging and acceptance are the direct result of inclusive practices in the classroom (Niholm & Alm, 2010).

Looking for concrete data around the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy, Dee & Penner (2017) studied an Ethnic Studies course in the San Francisco Unified School District. Their goal was to determine if participation in an Ethnic Studies course—with units that focused on social justice, discrimination, stereotypes, and social movements in U.S. history—could deter negative outcomes and positively change student behaviors. Their research, which was based on the belief that the fundamental framework of CRP benefits students by accessing “cultural priors” and affirming cultural identity and social engagement, indicated that there were significant improvements in multiple areas of student performance. Over the course of their study, they observed that enrollment in the Ethnic Studies course helped increase student attendance by 21%, contributed to a cumulative 1.4 grade point rise in ninth grade GPA, and brought about a jump in total

credits earned by 23 credits (Dee & Penner, 2017). Their study revealed that taking the Ethnic Studies course helped center students' experiences when they entered other spaces and that culturally relevant curriculum, when implemented with strong support, could be effective at improving the outcomes for students, particularly those who are considered at-risk (Dee & Penner, 2017).

A synthesis of studies compiled by Aronson & Laughter (2015) sought to gather information around student experiences to examine what changed when they engaged with a culturally relevant education. Basing their work off the foundations of Ladson-Billings and Gay, they examined the impact of culturally relevant education from a variety of studies assessing students in Mathematics, Science, History, Language Arts, and ELL classes. Students who were taught in environments practicing CRP became aware of the lack of access for minorities to positions in math and science and the subsequent importance of educating and creating opportunity for all voices in these fields. In addition, they studied and engaged with others' cultures and experiences through history and language arts. They also gained empathy for the struggles of English Language Learners in the face of ostracization. Aronson & Laughter's analysis determined that there is a clear connection between culturally relevant education and positive student outcomes, arguing that not only were impacts evident in test scores, but that other qualitative measures of achievement connected to academic skills and social concepts were positively impacted. Their work went on to argue that the frameworks necessary for success are also designed to push students and teachers into their communities to encourage engagement with the culture, which in turn shapes awareness in the classroom (Aronson & Laughter, 2015).

A study in 2011 examined minority student engagement in the classroom and found that in spaces where teachers were not engaging in culturally sensitive practices, minority students would often choose not to participate because they felt that engaging in the white-centered norms of the classroom would force them to lose their cultural identity and change their personality (White, 2011). White showed that when student culture is not taken into consideration, minority students are often faced with a two-fold challenge: overcoming cultural differences in order to express themselves while inadvertently (and in some cases, purposefully) being expected to be the sole representative of their culture for the classroom as a whole. The research demonstrates that ignoring students' culture creates conflict within minority students who are forced to reconcile their own cultural norms, beliefs, and patterns of communication with the expectations of the classroom. In a case study of engagement in urban English classrooms, Adkins-Coleman (2010) found that teachers utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy saw a variety of success indicators in their classrooms. By building structured learning spaces that acknowledged and celebrated student culture, classrooms became environments with motivated students who felt free to ask questions and participate in the classroom activities. The juxtaposition of these two studies demonstrates the very real negative outcomes of leaving culture unaddressed and the very positive value of culturally responsive classroom practices.

Impacts for Education Programs

The conversation around culturally responsive teaching often focuses on elementary and secondary education. However, as K-12 students benefit from culturally responsive classroom practices, so do pre-service teachers. In a study that examined pre-service teacher experiences in a licensure course that addressed topics of inequities,

racism, and privilege in schools, Trout and Basford (2016) found that students successfully develop cultural competence through embodied critical care. Their research looked at the practices Basford implemented with her students and examined the outcomes of her work with education students. The research found that Basford helps her students develop cultural competence through critical care and that her practices are largely successful in keeping students engaged. Without this engagement, students miss opportunities to ask important questions, challenge their own beliefs, examine other perspectives, and self-reflect. Fighting the “shut down” of education students in the face of difficult conversations is crucial in helping students experience transformational learning.

Basford uses the stories and experiences of cultures and communities different from her students’ to help them build compassion. She shares her own stories to demonstrate her imperfect journey around social justice. She asks students to process their thoughts privately and publicly, letting students first reflect and then share in a safe environment, then leans into the tension created by handling difficult topics. The research found the outcomes of Basford’s approach to be overwhelmingly positive, showing that students recognize the value of the work being done and are grateful for the results. While the context of the study focused on students in a teacher preparation program, its relevance to, and crossover with, culturally responsive pedagogy is clear and the benefits of engaging with culture in the classroom can be extended to classrooms at other levels.

Continuing with this examination, Rolón-Dow (2005) also focuses on critical care. Rolón-Dow documents distinctions between how white teachers and their students of color defined care in schools. In an ethnography focusing on the experiences of Puerto

Rican middle-school girls, Rolón-Dow identified what she calls “stock narratives” used uniquely by white teachers in her study, which reinforced dominant discourses that overlook forces like structural racism when describing what students care about. Critical care involves a teacher practicing authentic care, high expectations, and “political clarity” (Roberts, 2010) by recognizing race, religion, ethnicity, sexual identity, and gender as influencing factors that shape the experiences of students and their communities. Rolón-Dow’s study also defines critical care as teaching by understanding historical contexts for minority communities, exposing racialized beliefs within ideologies, and seeking to develop authentic relationships through culture and pedagogical practices. It also considers that race and ethnicity influence and shape the experiences of students of color in schools and their communities (Rolón-Dow, 2005).

Summary and Beyond

Proponents of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies have created a framework for celebrating and integrating culture into the classroom that has an undeniable impact on students. Direct correlations can be made between CRP and student academic achievement, classroom engagement, relationships to and connections with other cultures deepening understanding and empathy, and community. In a rapidly diversifying nation, the urgency of working toward these frameworks as standard, best practice is clearer than ever.

The next section will address the current climate and frequent misunderstanding connected to the work that accompanies these philosophies as they more regularly undergo scrutiny in the current political environment. Teachers hoping to engage with

culturally responsive practices in their classrooms are forced to do so in increasingly hostile conditions and often with little or no support for their work.

Current Climate

Since January 2021, 42 states have taken steps to restrict or limit how teachers can discuss concepts like racism, sexism, and gender identity in the classroom. Tennessee has enacted a law that limits discussions about slavery, racism, and white privilege in the classroom. Florida has pushed through multiple pieces of legislation aimed at banning critical race theory (CRT) and keeping sexual orientation and gender identity out of the classroom. A proposal in South Carolina would prohibit teachers from discussing any topic that “creates discomfort, guilt, or anguish” on the basis of political beliefs (Gross, 2022, para. 5). As of April 2022, school districts in 26 states have banned or opened investigations into more than 1,000 books.

More and more frequently, culturally responsive pedagogy is clashing with an “underpinned...fear” that children are being indoctrinated with dangerous social and political ideations of being oppressors and/or the oppressed (Will, 2022). A teacher in Missouri was accused of teaching CRT in her classroom and was subsequently terminated (Riley, 2022). A Tennessee teacher was reprimanded and later fired for addressing white privilege as fact instead of theory (Nathanson, 2022). A principal in Texas was put on probation after writing a letter to the community calling out systemic racism in the wake of George Floyd’s murder; his contract was not renewed (Lopez, 2022).

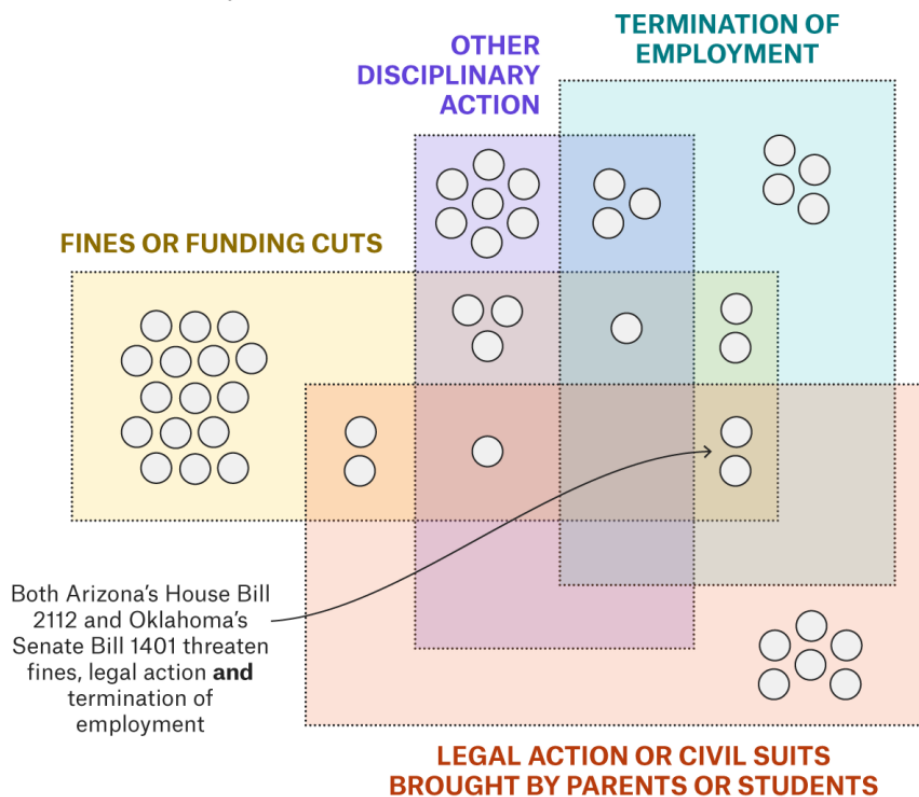
What’s more, legislative pushback has gone beyond limiting discussion topics in the classroom. Many have gone so far as to outline punishments for teachers in violation of said legislation (Johnson et al, 2022). An examination of the current legislation

determined that 47 of the 84 bills (enacted or proposed) came with some form of punishment, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Many anti-critical race theory bills threaten harsh punishments

Category of punishments among 47 bills introduced in state legislatures that impose penalties in K-12 schools for teaching “critical race theory” or “divisive concepts” related to race, as of April 25, 2022



FiveThirtyEight

SOURCE: PEN AMERICA

Note. This chart was created based on data gathered by Pen America, an organization seeking to unite writers and allies to celebrate creative expression and defend liberties that make it possible to demonstrate outcomes of creative expression around perceived divisive concepts. From “How anti-critical race theory bills are taking aim at teachers” by Johnson, T., Gold, E., & Zhao, A. (2022, May 9). FiveThirtyEight.

These laws have created a tremendous amount of uncertainty for teachers and administrators while, at the same time “deputizing parents and students to shape school curricula and influence how—or in some cases, if—teachers discuss difficult aspects of our history and contemporary society” (Johnson et al, 2022, para. 8).

Bills like Arizona House Bill 2281—popularly known as the “Ethnic Studies Ban”—and Florida House Bill 1577—commonly referred to as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill—seek to remove student access to and awareness of topics that some parents and legislatures have deemed problematic or radical. Bills like these (and others modeled after them) have forced the removal of literature from schools and led to the erasure of the history of minority groups (Paris & Alim, 2014). The limitations placed on teachers by these bills puts them in a position in which they must increasingly work to defend curriculum and classroom decisions. Topics that have been restricted will inevitably arise in the classroom at all grade levels, and refusing to engage with them fails to fully and effectively educate students. This censorship discourages critical thinking, avoids addressing the state of our institutions, and therefore precludes students from the important work of identifying where they see systemic racism built into our infrastructure (Gross, 2022).

As teacher preparation programs focus on the values of culturally responsive pedagogy and task their soon-to-be-teachers with addressing power and privilege in their classrooms (Trout & Basford, 2016), the tension will only continue to mount. The disconnect between the pedagogical value of culturally-responsive teaching and the perceived threat to traditional educational norms will only continue to grow if it is not addressed. Teachers will continue to bear the brunt of the attack until school administrators and school boards advocate for their teachers' work and connect with the community about the misinformation and positive impacts of CRP.

Summary and Beyond

As Paris and Alim note, leaning into the discomfort of the moment is crucial in “times of radically changing demographics, ongoing justice movements, and severe political and social back-lash” (Paris & Alim, 2017). So, despite the current attacks on teachers, cultural practices, and education as a whole, culturally responsive teaching has never been more relevant or more important. Work must continue to be done, however difficult and uncomfortable, to push for change.

The change needed will not take place at an individual level. The caring practices of teachers offer “seeds of hope” for meaningful, substantive change, but the issues must be addressed at *both* the individual and institutional levels (Rolón-Dow, 2005). Schools must cultivate leadership among their students, teachers, building staff, boards, administrators, parents/guardians, and the broader community in order to create a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment for all (Levinson, 2018). Stakeholders committed to positive change must look at the classroom and beyond in order to work against practices, policies, and structures that erase students and do not work toward educational justice for all students (Rolón-Dow, 2005).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this literature review sought to address the question: *how can educators create culturally responsive and sustaining classrooms and curriculum that best reflect students while navigating the rapidly changing public perception of cultural relevance in the classroom?* By examining the history and outcomes of culturally responsive pedagogy, the review attempted to demonstrate the importance of the work and its value to students, schools, and our education system. This work is necessary to

honor each student, address systemic racism, and integrate minority students' cultures into the classroom. The current political climate also plays an important role in understanding the challenges and setbacks faced by educators as they work to implement culturally responsive and critical care practices into their teaching.

The context provided by this literature serves to build the framework for my own experience and the catalyst for the project to follow. It seeks to address the theoretical framework and educational philosophy that led to my decision in my own classroom and provide defense of the practices laid out by Ladson-Billings, Gay, Paris & Alim, and others. Furthermore it sets the stage contextually for my own struggle and the struggles that many current and future educators will endure within the current social and political maelstrom.

The following chapter will outline a professional development session adaptable to various audiences: teachers, administrators, teacher educators, education students, etc. This professional development focuses on the work needing to be done around diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools, as well as the response of the community and the school, and potential outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

*“We are not in this fight to win, we are in this fight to struggle.”
-Gloria Ladson-Billings*

Introduction

What follows is an outline for the capstone project, which is based on the content from the previous chapters: my personal experience and the literature review. My experience and the literature review examine the necessary context for understanding and addressing the question: *how can educators create culturally responsive and sustaining classrooms and curriculum that best reflect students while navigating the rapidly changing public perception of cultural relevance in the classroom?* The capstone project will take the form of professional development for teachers (current and future) and uses the history of culturally responsive teaching, its importance, and the struggles of engaging in this work in the classroom to inform its focus and scope. This chapter will provide an overview of the project, a timeline for implementation, an analysis of audience and setting, and a rationale for the project as a whole.

Design Framework

The professional development is created around Mezirow’s Theory of Transformative Learning and uses the phases of transformative learning as its guiding structure. The phases include: a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, critical assessment, planning, course of action, acquisition of knowledge, exploring new roles, and self-advocacy). The capstone project uses my own experiences within the context of Mezirow’s Theory of Transformative learning to address the research conducted in

Chapter Two and to provide opportunities for reflection and professional learning in context.

Project Overview

The project is presented as a professional development session for educators (current and future). It uses my personal experience of transformative learning as the guidepost for examining attendee's own experiences, successes, and conflicts with culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. The workshop is broken into parts, chunking the narrative of my own journey into narrative arcs that align with Mezirow's phases of transformative learning. Within each section/segment, there is space for attendee discussion, reflection, and information-gathering. The project is presented in one three to four hour session. The project is intended to address the realities of engaging in culturally responsive teaching in today's climate, using the example of my personal experience as both the jumping off point for the session.

The initial version of the professional development will be focused on current and future educators, examining real-world implications of this work in the classroom, the responses to it, and the importance of continuing the work in the face of adversity. Later iterations of the session will be adapted for different audiences—teacher educators, administrators, educational professionals, school boards—using the same framework of my story and journey through my transformative learning experience. These future sessions will provide different lenses for the discussion, reflection and information-gathering engagement in the session based on the audience.

The professional development session focuses on three primary elements throughout: narrative, analysis/engagement, and reflection.

The narrative portion builds on existing materials from my personal experience and will use the work from Chapter One, videos, and communications as context and structure for the presentation as a whole. The narrative is crafted in a way that ties in elements that help build on the background, needs, and interests of the audience, all of whom would be stakeholders in the educational process (Knowles 1992). In this way, audiences are given an opportunity to contextualize the situation which, as Knowles argues, helps engage learners by building background and drawing connections to their own experiences throughout the session.

The analysis/engagement focuses on attendee's experiences and reflections, while tying in the work done in Chapter Two: examining the importance of culturally responsive teaching and its impact and influences on the choices communicated in the narrative. Attendees are provided a chance to engage with each other and the presenter as they discuss and interact with the information presented, asking questions and reacting to the narrative and analytic work they are engaging in. Knowles' theory on adult learners again comes into play as he argues that learners must be active participants in the process of inquiry (1992). Thus, this portion of the presentation looks at getting the audience involved through small and whole group discussions, and question and answer segments.

The reflection portion of the session asks attendees to take any lessons, insights, or learnings gathered from the narrative and analysis/engagement from the session and consider it within their own experience. This aligns with Knowles's idea that giving learners the opportunity to take initiative and frame learning within the context of their own situations, makes them better able to retain and internalize the information being

provided to them (1992). As the session is adapted and adjusted based on the audience (largely connected to the roles of the stakeholders present), reflection asks attendees to use the narrative and context for culturally responsive teaching and apply it to their context. The session asks them to consider how they might respond in a similar situation to my own, what they would hope a desired outcome might be, and how they might go about achieving that outcome. Attendees are asked to consider what the “line” of comfortability is for them personally within the expectations of the school, district, community, nation, and what that looks like in their own learning environment. This reflection is meant to help humanize the situation for each individual and help them consider what actionable steps they might take to build a safe environment around culturally responsive teaching in their own school.

While the capstone project itself is encapsulated in the professional development, additional work can and will be built upon in the future. A secondary part of the project will be to work toward publishing my experience and delivering professional development in real-world settings. A tertiary piece of the project will be to gather stories from other educators who have had experiences similar to my own; this long term goal would be to compile the stories into a larger narrative of educators celebrating and sustaining their students’ cultures while fighting for diversity, equity, and inclusion in their schools and communities.

Timeline for Delivery

The project can be implemented and delivered as soon as the spring of 2023. The timeliness of the conversation around what is controversial in the classrooms and the push for parent rights to access and influence their child’s curriculum make it crucial that

this be implemented as soon as possible. Much of the “Climate” portion of the research is based on recent information (2020-present) but could easily be updated if and when shifts occur.

Once completed, there will be several “test run” opportunities for delivering the content to several audiences, examining feedback from the participants, and making adjustments. The range of delivery will depend on interest and could include working with local school districts, connecting with teacher education programs in the Twin Cities area, and potentially delivering at educational conferences in the future.

Audience and Setting

The project is designed with a variety of audiences in mind and will be adjusted accordingly based on the given audience; the message and workshop can and will be altered to fit the audience it is being delivered to. Audiences may include current teachers, teacher educators, future teachers, administration, and school leadership. For example, a presentation for future teachers (those in an education program) would focus on the story—aligning the situation with work they are doing for engaging in culturally responsive work in their own classes—and would explain the pain points of the work in the current climate, culminating with work around resources available to them in the work and a reflection on their own support networks and values. A presentation for administration, however, might address the story, look at the district response (or lack thereof), provide context/insight from teachers and the union, and discuss options for how to handle similar situations. The crux of the presentation will largely remain the same from situation to situation, but the content (and the professional development session) will be adjusted and implemented based on the target audience.

Settings for the presentation would, similarly, differ based on the audiences. Most would occur on-site in teacher-educator classrooms, professional development for buildings, or at district buildings. The size and scope of the space could easily be adjusted to a small number of participants or a large group.

Assessment

During the initial phase of delivery, aimed at honing and fine-tuning the content and delivery of the presentation, direct feedback from the participants was gathered both in person and in through follow up communication. The information provided allowed me to focus and evaluate reactions to the content and consider where participants felt it was successful in building their understanding, and how it challenged their own thinking. The feedback from the initial delivery to “test-run” groups of undergraduate and graduate education students led to adjustments to the project before broader implementation.

Later assessment will largely be similar to the initial assessment and will be focused on the presentation as a whole and participant responses. Assessment (surveys) will address the overall impact of time spent engaging with the presentation and the professional development. Participants will be asked to reflect on the presentation, their own work during the time together, and, potentially, provide their own stories. A larger part of the project—potentially next steps—will be to build out stories of teachers who may have gone through similar experiences. The situation is not unique to my experience and using audiences to gather, and follow up on, these stories will play a vital step in building community and crafting a broader narrative around educators doing this good work in their classrooms.

Chapter Summary

Research and history have shown that honoring students' culture, celebrating diversity, and acknowledging and working against the underlying systemic problems within the educational system has an overwhelmingly positive impact on students. Thus, the project seeks to use a real-world experience to frame the importance of the work being done while examining the very real implications of how that work can play out in the classroom. The goal will be to challenge a variety of audiences to consider what this work might look like in their schools and what they might do in a similar situation. Often, the hypotheticals and theoreticals of education programs and the mindset of "it hasn't happened here" can detach us from the realities of the struggles many teachers are facing. This project seeks to put those struggles front and center and challenge educational stakeholders to consider their role and purpose in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in their learning environments.

The exploration of this project will be discussed in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

*“We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience.”
- John Dewey*

Introduction

The purpose of this capstone’s research, professional development, and reflection have been to address the question: *how can educators create culturally responsive and sustaining classrooms and curriculum that best reflect students while navigating the rapidly changing public perception of cultural relevance in the classroom?* To examine the process, this chapter will be divided into three main sections: process review, project examination, and dissemination.

Part one of the reflection will address the major learnings gained from the process, both in research and in implementation of the project. It will revisit the literature review to examine the most impactful content and, in turn, the most influential content in shaping the overall project and goals. The next section will look at the implications of the capstone and how to go about informing decision makers of the work needing to be done. It will examine the limitations of the project as a whole and address any recommendations for future research and/or next steps someone else might take. The final section will put forth plans for sharing the results within the educational community and address the benefits the project hopes to provide to the profession as a whole.

Process Review

Major Learnings

Perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned in this process is reflected in the quote by John Dewey at the beginning of this section. The experience outlined in Chapter One

and the subsequent actions and choices I made were just that: an experience. Going into the capstone project, I knew that I wanted to turn my experience into something more than negativity and trauma; I wanted to make something meaningful and impactful from it. What I didn't know was that examining my journey and reflecting—with the intent of walking *others* through the same experience—would be where my real learning would take place. Thinking about the project, I knew it would be at times painful to reflect on everything that happened, but I did not expect to come away with a framework for my journey or a name for what I experienced: transformative learning. Part of my own journey through the transformative learning process came about as a result of the capstone work. The act of reflecting on my experience in the context of the larger conversation around culturally responsive teaching helped me realize the agency and purpose I have to help teachers navigate and understand their roles in situations like my own.

I was fortunate enough to present my experience to several groups of masters and undergraduate students. This allowed me to share my story to help the groups (and myself) reflect on our roles as educators in an increasingly confrontational world. Being able to give my presentation (in adjusted, adapted form) was crucial in honing the overall structure and function of each portion of the professional development session. The real, authentic feedback from the groups has provided focus and clarity around the most impactful parts of what I put forth in this project. The value of this input shows how crucial it is to move things out of theoretical context and into practice, which served as a great reminder of why I created the capstone project in the first place and why I have structured it the way that I have. I am grateful for having had this sounding board and

outlet for reflection and it will serve as a reminder in future projects/research to get it into the real world.

Reflection on Literature Review

Examining the history and background of culturally responsive teaching was one of the most meaningful parts of the research process. Compiling the information around the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, Zaretta Hammond, Django Paris, and Samy Alim was influential in determining a set of baseline values for writing the capstone and crafting the professional development component of the project. The depth of the work to be done around culturally responsive teaching and the lengths we still need to go in order to push for diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools has also been an overwhelming and driving force behind this work. Examining the history and progression of culturally responsive pedagogy through its various stages helped me realize that, while each has its own tenets and adds its own ideas to the conversation, they have several common goals. First, we must focus student learning around cultural competence by building bridges between experiences and cultures. Second, teachers should provide a safe space for brain development through positive relationships and challenging instruction that addresses a variety of needs and styles. And finally, we must acknowledge the way education provides access to power structures in a rapidly changing world. Working to better understand my role in this work has been an affirming outcome of this capstone project, and I hope to benefit other teachers through the project's implementation.

One of the most informative and, honestly, most harrowing parts of the literature review came from digging into the current climate around the state of education. There

are so many stories I came across that are similar to my own. There are hundreds of bills being introduced with the intent to inhibit, and even silence, educators and dictate what they can and cannot teach. There are continued clashes between the values of culturally responsive teaching and the misinterpretation of it as indoctrination. The work done by Pen America to compile and detail the current state of legislation across the country and subsequent analysis by Johnson et. al (2022) to examine the repercussions of this legislation was incredibly impactful in my personal drive and passion. Knowing that we are at a crossroads in education where the very values we are taught in teacher preparation programs are being questioned, attacked, and legislated against demonstrates the increased need for awareness and action. The revelations that came out of this section of the literature review reinforced the value of the work being done around culturally responsive teaching and confirmed my resolve to meaningfully address the controversy in a context that will help teachers understand the value and navigate the increasingly troubled waters of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom.

Project Examination

Implications

The goal of this project is to help educators (current and future) and other stakeholders in education reflect on our values and beliefs and assess our roles in enacting those values in the classroom. I hope to provide context for culturally responsive teaching in action, while also addressing the realities of certain areas of public perception when it comes to our classrooms. And, while my experience was very public and dramatic, I want people to understand that clashes against culturally responsive teaching are happening everywhere and on a daily basis. It's important to see examples of what

happens in our schools and to increase awareness of what our role as culturally responsive teachers is to ensure that our students are seen and our colleagues supported in their work.

The hope would be that educators and administrators alike would have a better understanding of the need for culturally responsive teaching in their schools. The goal has been to help each stakeholder understand their role in this work and understand their roles when situations like mine arise.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of my project is that it relies heavily on my personal experience and, therefore, has limited opportunities for being implemented by anyone other than myself. In an attempt to address this limiting factor, I examined my project to consider what it might look like if my experience was removed, with the focus resting entirely on culturally responsive teaching, transformative learning, and self examination by attendees. I found it difficult to extricate the project from my experience, however, as I believe it provides a perspective that is otherwise lost. Many people have not experienced a situation like mine (either personally or peripherally), but may have heard similar stories, so using the story as a framework can help contextualize and humanize the experience. While the nature of my project can be limiting because of how personal it is, I feel that the strength of the project derives from the connection and context it provides to the ideas that are covered. And, while it is not easily transferable in its entirety, my story could easily be used as the jumping-off point for others who may want to draw on the professional development for their own purpose. Ultimately, using my experience will

allow me to leverage my story into something positive and impactful for the overall work being done.

Future Research

One area of continued research would be to examine the next development in the culturally responsive conversation. As culture shifts and pedagogy changes, there will be new additions to the research and focus around implementing culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. It will be necessary for future research to examine these shifts and changes and reconcile them with the existing work around this pedagogy.

Additionally, as political winds shift and elected officials come and go, perception around this work will change, for better and for worse. Keeping a pulse on the sentiments over time will be crucial in understanding and navigating the changing battlegrounds around education.

The project can (and will) be extended from its current form to account for the opportunity to address different groups. The focus for educators will look different than a group of administrators, and that will look different than a group of district decision makers, like school board members. Accounting for this shift, but maintaining the personalized structure, will be crucial in adapting this for varied audiences. For example, an administrator may benefit from understanding the perspective of a teacher going through this experience so they can better-prepare for handling a similar situation and working with their employee in the future. Board members or superintendents might benefit by considering the framework they have in place and supports available for teachers delivering on district expectations, or they may consider how policies affect daily life in the classroom.

Additionally, the work in this project could be built upon by other educators who have experienced similar situations. One of my goals as I am able to deliver and expand the audience around my experience and culturally responsive teaching is to collect the stories of educators who have fought through the same struggles outlined in this project. Whether by compiling stories, reflecting on the reality of educators in defending their choices and spaces, or building on the research and framework, there is opportunity for this project to expand and for the research to continue.

Dissemination

Communicating Results

The project has already gone through several rounds of test-runs with different groups—graduate and undergraduate—of future educators. I have had the opportunity to share my story in the context of transformative learning and engage with these educators to discuss their concerns as they head into the classroom. It is my hope that this work can continue through connections with my graduate professors and that the opportunity to share this work and my story will continue in the years to come.

I have spoken with my principal and with the building operations committee of another school in my district about the possibility of delivering the professional development at one of our designated inservice days. The goal would be to provide the training in one session (which may require some edits/adjustments to account for scope and sequence based on attendees and available time) to maximize impact and consistency of my personal experience in context with the work done throughout the session.

I have also been working with two of my graduate professors to capture my experience in the greater context of the current educational conversation. We have been

accepted to present this topic at the 2023 American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference in the category of Emancipatory Movements and Transformative Interruptions in Teaching and Teacher Education Investigations. This work will encompass a large portion of my project in conjunction with additional research. Our collaboration will ultimately result in a published paper.

Benefit to Profession

Teachers are more regularly being forced to defend curriculum and classroom decisions around topics like racism, sexism, gender identity, and social-emotional learning. Those in power should be protecting and advocating for teachers, but in many cases, the work falls to individual teachers to defend their choices in ways and at a volume they have never had to before. Engaging with this project will hopefully provide a model for how to respond to situations like my own and provide some tools to help defend our choices in our current turbulent times. Additionally, the project will serve as a reminder of the responsibility of stakeholders within education (future teachers, current teachers, teacher educators, administration, school board) as to their roles in fighting to protect inclusive choices in their classrooms.

The crux of this work centers around advocating for and supporting students effectively and with courage. The hope is that this project will provide an example of how to navigate the politically-charged controversy around schools and reinforce the importance of that work. The project aims to share an experience openly and honestly with as wide an audience as possible to help educators reflect and consider how to build a network of allies and support for the work we are engaging in and how to lean into, instead of shying away from, the culture wars happening around schools. The hope is that

teachers who understand the climate into which they are heading (or are already teaching) and can see the benefits of this work through the eyes of someone who went through it, will help teachers stay in the field, giving purpose and meaning to their work in new ways.

Conclusion

While my experience teaching middle school students about Marsha P. Johnson was the catalyst for my own journey and transformative learning, it also served as the spark that would become this capstone. The entirety of this capstone has been focused around the question: *How can educators create inclusive classrooms and curriculum that best reflect students while navigating the rapidly changing public perception of cultural relevance in the classroom?* To that end, the literature review, project, and reflection have examined my personal journey, the history of culturally responsive teaching, and the current climate around culture in schools.

I hope that this project will help teachers better-understand the importance of culturally responsive teaching, what can happen when those practices are misunderstood, and how and why we need to continue to do this important work in our classrooms. Ultimately, my goal is to take what was a devastating and earth-shattering experience for myself and turn it into something that will help teachers navigate their careers and reinvest in their students. By leaning into the work of culturally responsive teaching, we can ensure that our students are seen, heard, and valued. And, hopefully, we can find renewed purpose and meaning in this profession.

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