

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES: ONE URBAN ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL STORY

by

SHAVAUN MINCEY

(Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry)

ABSTRACT

In an era where the achievement gap persists as a significant challenge, creating culturally responsive learning environments in urban elementary schools is essential to ensuring equitable educational outcomes for all students. The purpose of the action research study was to examine culturally responsive teaching practices in an urban elementary school. The study explored teacher perceptions of student outcomes after professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices. Data collection incorporated qualitative and quantitative methods, including researcher journal notes, pre- and post-questionnaires, teacher reflection responses, and interviews. The major themes that emerged from the data analysis were responsive environments, facilitative leadership, and systemic integration.

INDEX WORDS: Culturally Responsive Leadership, Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices, Instructional Practices, Professional Development, Professional Learning Community (PLC), School Leaders, Urban Elementary School

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES: ONE URBAN ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL STORY

by

SHAVAUN MINCEY

B.S., Bethune Cookman College, 2002

M.Ed., Bethune-Cookman University, 2010

Ed.S., Kennesaw University, 2017

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2025

© 2025

Shavaun Mincey

All Rights Reserved

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES: ONE URBAN ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL STORY

by

SHAVAUN MINCEY

Major Professor:	Jami Royal Berry
Committee:	John Dayton
	Karen C. Bryant

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2025

DEDICATION

To my great-grandmother, Alberta McMillian, born in 1896, in a time when this country determined she had no right to a free and appropriate education. A woman who desperately wanted to read and write and learned to write her name in her 90s—a final act of protest and unwavering determination. We speak your name.

To my grandmother, Julia Lee Laster, who cleaned homes for a living, yet was a drummer, teacher, preacher, and the best Sunday tea hostess. A woman who was a seamstress, a neighborhood lady selling conch salad, and who refused to let a broken system impede her array of talents. The woman who taught my great-grandmother to write her name before she died. We speak your name.

To my mother, Gloria Mincey, born prior to Brown v. Board of Education, a brilliant and intelligent woman, a great teacher and preacher. My shero I watched be refused access to the pulpit as a woman, forced to speak from the podium beneath the men. A woman who later became the first ordained women pastor in one of the largest most historic churches in Miami, Florida. You've instilled a love of education in me at a very young age and you have been my biggest supporter my entire life. Thank you for undoubtedly believing in me every single step of the way. We speak your name.

Their lives, lived in the face of injustice and limited opportunity, inspire this work and fuel my commitment to educational equity for all. "I come as one, but I stand as 10,000." ~ Maya Angelou

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not be complete without the support and direction of my wonderful chair, Dr. Berry. Thank you for your undying support and honest feedback. I appreciate your dedication to my success. Your expertise has been invaluable in shaping the direction of this research and contributing significantly to its refinement. Thank you to my committee and UGA faculty members, Dr. Karen Bryant, Dr. Jamon Flowers, Dr. Sally Zepeda, Dr. Keith Simmons, and Dr. Stephanie Goldman for being an unforgettable part of my journey. To my colleague who got me through this, my critical friend Dr. Emily Young, thank you forever! I would also like to thank the Doctors of 2024 and 2025 for being great people and fun to be around. Thank you to Dr. Leilani Scott and Dr. Deanna Rogers for being encouragement and accountability partners and to Dr. Markita Spikes for being an uplifting editor.

I extend my sincere gratitude to all my staff and the educational community who have supported me throughout this process, as well as to those dedicated to achieving educational justice—not for some children, not for most children, but for *each and every* child. I stand with you in solidarity in this great mission.

To my circle of mentors, Dr. Pam Williams, Dr. Clay Hunter, Dr. Dione Simon, Dr. Aleigha Henderson-Rosser, and Dr. Natasha Rachell, thank you for your encouragement and belief in me. I stand on the shoulders of great people.

To my family, Yogi, Bri, and Lawanda, as well as all my friends and support systems, especially the Hyltons, your love and support have been my constant source of strength. Thank you for motivating me and helping care for Jackson. My gratitude for you all is immense.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Purpose of the Study	5
Research Questions	6
Definition of Terms.....	6
Theoretical Framework	7
Logic Model	9
Overview of the Methodology.....	11
Interventions	12
Significance of this Study.....	13
Organization of the Dissertation.....	14
2 REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE.....	15
Educational Equity.....	17
Role of Leadership.....	17
Culturally Responsive Teaching.....	18

Professional Development.....	26
Chapter Summary	30
3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	32
Rationale for Qualitative Research Design	33
Overview of Action Research Methods	35
Action Research Design	37
Context of the Study	50
Data Collection Methods.....	56
Interventions	59
Data Analysis Methods	62
Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability	65
Subjectivity Statement	66
Limitations.....	67
Chapter Summary	68
4 FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE.....	69
Context of the Study	71
Problem Framing Based on the Site.....	72
The Story and Outcomes	74
Initial Design Team Meeting.....	78
Action Research Cycle I.....	82
Action Research Cycle II	87
Action Research Cycle III	93
Chapter Summary	98

5	ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE.....	100
	Overview of Key Findings and Themes.....	102
	Introduction to Analysis.....	103
	Key Themes and Findings	104
	Research Question 1.....	107
	Research Question 2.....	113
	Research Question 3.....	117
	Chapter Summary	122
6	CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP..	123
	Summary of the Findings and Themes.....	124
	Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed.....	126
	Major Themes Related to the Research Questions	132
	Limitations of the Current Study	134
	Implications and Recommendations for School and District Leaders.....	136
	Implications and Recommendations for Policy.....	137
	Implications and Recommendations for Future Research.....	138
	Concluding Thoughts.....	139
	REFERENCES	141
	APPENDICES	
	A University of Georgia Consent Form: Action Research Design Team	153
	B University of Georgia Consent Form: Action Research Implementation Team.....	155
	C ARIT Post Cycle Reflective Questionnaire	157

D	ARIT Focus Group Protocol	158
E	ARDT Focus Group Protocol.....	159
F	Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Self-Assessment	160

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1.1: Racial demographic percentage for students and teachers.....	3
Table 3.1: Action Research Design Team	45
Table 3.2: Action Research Implementation Team.....	47
Table 3.3: Action Research Timeline	48
Table 3.4: GOSA Percentage of Enrollment.....	50
Table 3.5: Percentage of Students Proficient.....	52
Table 3.6: Percentage of Students Proficient Subgroups.....	53
Table 3.7: Reflective Questionnaire Questions.....	58
Table 3.8: Focus Group Questions	59
Table 3.9: Interventions for Study.....	61
Table 3.10: Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness.....	64
Table 3.11: Triangulation of Research Methods.....	65
Table 4.1: Action Research Design Team	75
Table 4.2: Action Research Implementation Team.....	77
Table 4.3: Action Research Timeline	79
Table 4.4: Action Research Cycle I Meetings	81
Table 4.5: Action Research Cycle II Meetings	89
Table 4.6: Action Research Cycle III Meetings.....	95
Table 5.1: Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions	105

Table 5.2:	Summary of Findings Connected to Research Questions	106
Table 5.3:	ARDT and ARIT coding for Research Question 1	109
Table 5.4:	ARDT and ARIT coding for Research Question 2.....	114
Table 5.5:	ARDT and ARIT coding for Research Question 3.....	118
Table 6.1:	Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions	135

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1: Theoretical Framework Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	8
Figure 1.2: Logic Model	10
Figure 3.1: The Spiraling Nature of Action Research	38
Figure 3.2: Logic Model PDSA Cycle.....	40
Figure 3.3: Equity Transformational Cycle.....	40
Figure 4.1: Percentage of Students Proficient Ethnicity.....	73
Figure 4.2: Instructional Framework	90

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Although education leaders increased their focus on the achievement gaps over 20 years ago, marked disproportionality between student groups still exists. Years ago, when educational leaders introduced the concept of the achievement gap, students of color overtly suffered academically, performing below their peers. This trend persists today, despite 65 years since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019, as cited in U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016).

There have been many strides in addressing the national achievement gap in education. Most notable is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The ESEA Network (n.d.) suggested that the ESEA has been “the most far-reaching federal legislation affecting education ever passed by Congress” (ESEA Network, About ESEA section, para. 1). By 2025, there had been six different reauthorizations of ESEA focused on closing the achievement gap since 1964. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1964. During the Ronald Reagan presidency, Congress passed the Education Consolidation & Improvement Act in 1981 and the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary & Secondary School Improvement Act in 1988.

President Bill Clinton passed the Improving America’s Schools Act in 1994, and President George W. Bush passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. At the time of this study, the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), was passed into law during the Barack Obama presidency. The evolving legislation was

a continued attempt to ensure that all students had an equal opportunity for an efficacious educational experience. Despite this evolution, there continues to be a gap in student performance between students of color and their white peers. According to Aronson and Laughter (2016), “such school reform has only failed historically marginalized students and exacerbated achievement gaps because it focused solely on individual achievement, pitting student against student, teacher against teacher, district against district” (p. 199).

There has been a long-standing educational equity battle in the United States. Despite over 30 years of education reform, the observations made by Charles Payne, an education researcher, remain relevant: There has been “so much reform and so little change” (Hammond, 2015, p.2). “Equity is not about equal treatment of students, but equal educational results. With equity, all students-no-exceptions are guaranteed success in schools” (Linton, 2011, p. 22). Safir and Dugan (2021) provided a clear and concise definition of equity: “Equity is an approach to ensuring equally high outcomes for all by removing the predictability of success or failure that currently correlates with any racial, social, economic, or cultural factor” (p. 29).

The achievement gap uncovers the demographic groups of students who may not receive the same educational experience. Data disaggregation by racial groups, prompted by NCLB and continued in ESSA, further highlights the academic gaps in American schools. As educators intently review these groups in the K12 public school setting, they uncover a stark difference in the racial diversity of the students and the racial makeup of the teachers serving the students. This may differ from state to state. Table 1.1 below includes the racial demographic data for students and teachers in the state where this study occurred.

Table 1.1

Racial demographic percentage for students and teachers in the state of Georgia (2020-2021)

Groups	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native American	Multiracial/Other
Students	37.4%	39.2%	15.6%	3.5%	0.1%	4.2%
Teachers	67.8%	26.5%	2.6%	1.3%	0.2%	1.6%

In 2021, the state Department of Education reported that white teachers accounted for almost 70% of the teacher workforce. In contrast, about 37% of students in Georgia are White, and 63% of the student population is non-white (State Department of Education, 2021). The state report also noted that 79.5% of the teacher workforce was female, compared to 49% of the student population. This incongruence in teacher/student demographics is not a discovery. This continues to be a topic of discussion in educational reform initiatives. In a guide to teaching all students equitably, Krasnoff (2016) reported the following:

A mandate for change requires that racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students have the opportunity to meet their learning challenges with the strength and relevance found in their own cultural frame of reference. Therefore, teachers must be prepared with a thorough understanding of the specific cultures of the students they teach, how that culture affects student-learning behaviors, and how they can change classroom interactions and instruction to embrace the differences (p. i).

As educators continue brainstorming and experimenting to close the achievement gap, many thought leaders return to classrooms to examine pedagogical practices more closely. Specifically, some suggest that the cultural competence/proficiency of a teacher may directly impact student performance. “While the achievement gap has created the epidemic of dependent learners, culturally responsive teaching can be a systematic catalyst to reaching marginalized

students who continue to underperform in relation to their peers in other subgroups” (Hammond, 2014, p.15).

Statement of the Problem

As part of the onboarding process as a new principal of Boston Academy, it was revealed that a primary area of focus was closing the racial achievement gap that had been long-standing. A lingering question remained based on the change in economic demographics and the school becoming a non-Title school, where only a tiny percentage of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Why is the achievement gap not closing? After a series of district and local school walk-throughs and listening sessions, the resounding theme was the variation in instructional practices across the building connected to an unclear vision of instructional coherence set by the school administration. Two things were missing: generational culture awareness and a mindset of high expectations for all children. This created a new question: What happens in an urban elementary school when staff members participate in an intense semester of professional development in culturally responsive teaching?

Overview of the Research Site Context

This research study was conducted at Boston Academy, an urban Pre-K-5th-grade elementary school within the Washington Public Schools (WPS) system. Established in 1865, Boston Academy boasts a rich history, including past affiliations with a different county and temporary closure. Notably, the original one-room schoolhouse remains in the community, serving as a historical testament to the enduring presence of the school.

Boston Academy caters to approximately 565 students, reflecting the diverse composition of the surrounding Washington area. While the WPS student population primarily reflects a majority African American demographic, Boston Academy exhibits a more balanced

composition with substantial representation from Black, Hispanic, and White student groups. Although not a Title I school, a notable portion of the student body qualifies for free and reduced lunch programs, highlighting a commitment to serving students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

During this study, Boston Academy had a staff of 75. Approximately 10 staff members are founding members of the remodeled school, which reopened in 2003. Most teachers held master's degrees and possessed extensive teaching experience, exceeding six years on average. Notably, the school fosters a diverse staff composition that mirrors student demographics.

Additionally, Boston Academy implements a unique instructional approach through its Dual Language Immersion (DLI) program, offering students an opportunity to acquire proficiency in both English and Spanish through a structured 50/50 model. Additionally, the school participates in the North Washington Cluster, a K-12 International Baccalaureate (IB) cluster, reinforcing its commitment to providing students with rigorous and comprehensive learning opportunities. While Boston Academy has demonstrated progress in recent years, as evidenced by increasing student attendance and improved performance on standardized assessments, there are still areas for improvement. Addressing identified achievement gaps among student subgroups remains crucial for the school community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of elementary school teachers as they learned and implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms, specifically in reading and math. This study investigated the perspectives of the leader facilitating professional learning and observing the implementation of culturally responsive teaching, the implications of underperforming subgroups of students, and the impact of

professional learning on the student achievement gap. The researcher engaged with an action research team.

Research Questions

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following key terms are defined:

- A “Professional Learning Community” (PLC) in the Elementary school context is a structure that groups teachers into grade-level teams that focus on learning. These teams co-create processes where they work together to analyze data and decide on instructional actions to improve student learning.
- “Culturally Responsive Teaching” in an Elementary school refers to the teacher’s ability to use cultural knowledge and relationship building as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content and promote effective information processing.

- “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” in the context of a K -12 school setting, is defined as a pedagogy of opposition to assimilationist teaching designed to help students fit into the existing social order but instead celebrate the unique culture of individual students. It rests on three criteria: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and maintain cultural competence; (c) students must develop critical consciousness to challenge the status quo.
- “Equity” in the Elementary school context is the approach to ensuring equally high outcomes for all students by removing the predictability of success or failure that correlates with any racial, social, economic, or cultural factor.
- “Inequity by design” in the context of an Elementary school is a term that describes the underdeveloped cognitive information processing skills of diverse students and their confidence as intellectuals in a school setting that creates inequitable outcomes.
- “Inclusion” in the context of an Elementary school is described as engagement within a community that honors the equal worth and inherent dignity of each person.

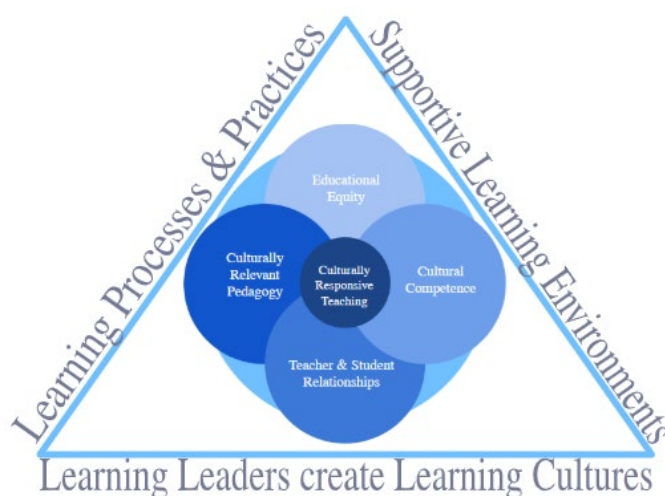
Theoretical Framework

The researcher intended to identify strategies and principles that could contribute to closing the student achievement gap among racial groups. The researcher designed a theoretical framework as a structured lens to question, hypothesize, and scrutinize literature that provided theories on this specific topic. One theory for impacting the racial academic achievement gap is implementing culturally responsive teaching practices. This action research study merged the theories of Gloria Ladson-Billings (Culturally Relevant Pedagogy), Geneva Gay (Culturally Responsive Teaching), and Zaretta Hammond (Educational Neuroscience of Culturally

Responsive Teaching) to form the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Theoretical Framework, as shown in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Theory



Note: Adapted from Garvin et al. (2008) and Sarder (2016)

Ladson-Billings (2021) stated, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy concept rests on three criteria or propositions: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness” (p. 47). Gay (2018), grounded in Ladson-Billings’s work, compiled ideas from a variety of scholars, using culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and offered “eight characteristics of CRT: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, emancipatory, humanistic, and ethical” (p. 36). The theoretical framework in this research centers on culturally responsive pedagogy. Hammond (2015) suggested that educators can anticipate struggling with operationalizing culturally responsive pedagogical principles into culturally responsive teaching practices. As a result of this challenge, she identified four components of her Ready for Rigor framework that solve this problem: awareness, learning partnerships, information processing, and learning environment (Hammond, 2015, p. 17).

The four components of the framework combine the ideas of all three scholars and are used to address the three research questions. The first component, Educational Equity, addresses research Question 2, how the leader fosters environments that reduce the probability of who succeeds and who fails. The second component, Cultural Competence, addresses Question 1, the perspectives of cultural responsiveness from the viewpoints of teachers. The third component, Student and Teacher Relationships, addresses Questions 1 and 2, the roles of teachers and administrators. The fourth component addresses Question 3, designing and implementing culturally responsive teaching practices.

Logic Model

The logic model is a conceptual framework used to guide the action research team. The logic model chosen compiled two change theories: the Appreciative Inquiry and the Equity Transformation Cycle. Both models follow a similar Deming (1993) model, where the team planned, researched, tested, acted, and repeated the process. This logic model includes four cyclical steps. Figure 1.2 visualizes the four components.

1. Look and Listen
2. Uncover and Question
3. Reimagine and Design
4. Act and Test

Figure 1.2*Logic Model*

The action research design began with looking at data and listening to parents through analyzing quantitative survey data. As the team scrutinized the data, they used a curious mindset to uncover and question the data to find inequities, unspoken marginalization, and trends in various student groups. As teachers on the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) participated in professional learning, they used that learning to reimagine and design culturally responsive classroom practices. In 2-week phases, teachers designed culturally responsive strategies to act and test. The arrows in Figure 1.2 show how the action research team reflected, collaborated, and responded to the implementation with fluidity. The cycle is not continuously moving forward, but is more fluid, where sometimes participants repeat the previous step if needed.

Overview of the Methodology

Action research is a hands-on approach to discovering more about a topic or problem of practice. This approach is highly beneficial in education and similar to professional development learning models. Masters (1995) quotes Kurt Lewin's argument that to "understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry" (p.1). Action research, like professional learning communities in education, includes many voices and experts to examine a problem of practice and choose a research method to probe deeper to locate more information and ways that may help address that problem of practice. Action research is met with mixed reviews, some even believing it is an unrealistic and ineffective approach to educational research. However, it is an ideal way for educators in different roles to work together to understand their work more, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data (Glanz, 2014).

Action research was appropriate for this study because it tests what educators feel they intuitively know (Glanz, 2014). The researcher engaged with an action research team of educators who spent time with an acute focus on an issue not generally discussed during weekly planning team meetings. The process allowed them to gather evidence to define the problem more precisely, consequently influencing a hypothesis for the team and empowering them to explore various strategies on the job (Corey, 1954). As an organized group of researchers, they routinely checked in and reflected on the impact of the implemented approaches to the problem of practice.

The achievement gap continued to be a general problem of practice, researched globally. The gap became a focus at a suburban elementary school in an urban school district. Action research allowed elementary school staff participants and the researcher to ruminate on a

potential cause of students in certain demographic groups performing significantly lower than their peers. The action research team specifically focused on identifying if culturally responsive practices positively impacted student performance in underperforming groups, the perspectives and interpretations of culturally responsive teaching practices, and the overall impact of professional development on teacher practice.

Data collection for this study incorporated qualitative and quantitative methods. These methods included:

1. Researcher journal notes based on observations of professional learning meetings and classroom observations;
2. Pre- and Post questionnaires for teachers on culturally responsive teaching practices;
3. Periodic teacher reflection responses that provided a progress perspective;
4. Interviews with teachers periodically throughout the action research;
5. District Universal Screener and local common assessment growth scores in reading and math.

Interventions

An intervention is an action taken to solve a problem. The intervention was a professional learning community comprising primary, intermediate, and support teachers. The teachers actively participated alongside the researcher in designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in elementary school classes. To create and sustain a culturally responsive school environment, the researcher collected and analyzed the perceptions and interpretations of teachers, the behaviors and actions of administrators, and the thoughts, processes, and interpretations of the action research teams.

The group identified strategies to implement in 3-week cycles based on professional learning for culturally responsive teaching practices. The teachers used classroom data to map out the achievement gap and to see if they saw significant changes among Black and Hispanic students. The action research team used a 3-prompt questionnaire to reflect on the consistency of the implementation and to note any obstacles. The team met weekly to debrief and rate the effectiveness and ease of using the strategies and their perceived student impact. During the weekly collaboration meeting, the team tweaked the strategies based on team feedback or selected a different implementation technique. There were a variety of interventions used. The administrator/researcher led professional development using reading and discussion protocols. The teachers mutually chose strategies to implement in their reading or math class blocks. Teachers debriefed lessons together with the team and answered digital questionnaires through a form to document their experiences and perceptions over time.

Significance of this Study

Hispanic and Black students continue to underperform on standardized achievement tests in comparison to White, Asian, Indian, and other students with different ethnic backgrounds. The United States has passed several legislative efforts to close the performance gap. Although this has been an educational focus for the last 60 years, there has not been much progress. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay have written extensively about how culturally responsive teaching improves performance in Black and Hispanic children. The significance of this study is to examine the perceptions of teachers who learn, design, and implement culturally responsive teaching in an urban elementary school.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the study of this dissertation and lays out an overview of the research questions, problem of practice, and methods for the study. Chapter 2 reviews the related literature for the study and discusses educational equity, professional learning, and cultural responsiveness. Chapter 3 describes the methodology involved in action research and the qualitative methods related to this study. It also amplifies the context in which the study was conducted. Chapter 4 examines the findings from the action research case.

Chapter 5 details the Analysis of Findings from the action research case based on the action research cycles related to the research questions that guided this study. This chapter also describes and analyzes the interventions the researcher and the action research team implemented. Chapter 6 summarizes the study, provides a discussion about the findings from the research questions, and offers implications for school leaders, as well as implications for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

A widely known problem in education is the pervasive achievement gap. It is a problem of practice worth studying if all children, regardless of race and class, are not performing as well as their peers in differing socio-economic and racial groups. Many educational experts increasingly emphasize the value of culturally responsive teaching methods in decreasing low achievement among marginalized students (Cherfas et al., 2021). It might be argued that implementing educational ideologies based on race is unfair and unnecessary; however, if aiming to target the success of all students, “a productive starting point is to design teaching and learning to the group(s) of students who have been marginalized the most in society and within schools” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 11).

The next generation of theorists concerned about the inequities in academic achievement between mainstream students and marginalized students within schools and the larger society have researched and constructed theories that have generated teaching implications for how to close the achievement gap (Gay, 2018). When teachers learn about and understand the lived experiences and cultures of students, the educators can be culturally responsive, promoting psychological safety and positively impacting student learning and output (Cholewa et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of elementary school teachers as they learned and implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms, specifically in reading and math. This study investigated the perspectives of the leader facilitating professional learning and observing the implementation of culturally responsive

teaching, the implications of underperforming subgroups of students, and the impact of professional learning on the student achievement gap.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?

To examine the research questions, the researcher worked with an action research team to investigate the impact of professional development on culturally responsive teaching practices in an urban elementary school. Interviews, reflective protocols, and a professional learning community (PLC) were used to gather perspectives on implementing these practices.

The researcher conducted a literature review on professional development in culturally responsive teaching, divided into three sections. The first section provides a historical overview of educational equity and the various initiatives to close the achievement gap in K-12 schools. The second section explicates the definition of culturally responsive teaching (CRT). This section also clarifies the difference between culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and culturally responsive teaching, connecting the three shared pillars between the two terms. The remaining

section investigates the impact of professional development and the importance of collective efficacy amongst a group of teachers.

Educational Equity

Educational Reform

Significant progress has been made to close the achievement gap in education nationwide. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is the most well-known legislation supporting progress. According to the ESEA Network (n.d.), the ESEA is “the most far-reaching federal legislation affecting education ever passed by Congress” (ESEA Network, n.d., para. 1). Since 1964, there have been six distinct reauthorizations of ESEA to reduce the achievement gap, beginning with Executive Order No. ESA-64 was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. During the Ronald Reagan administration in the 1980s, Congress approved two important laws: the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary & Secondary School Improvement Act (1988) and the Education Consolidation & Improvement Act (1981). President Bill Clinton passed the Improving America's Schools Act in 1994, and President George W. Bush passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. At the time of this study, the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), was passed into law during the Barack Obama presidency.

Role of leadership

The National Equity Project referenced the importance of a school leader in minimizing achievement gaps. School leaders are the activators in building a school culture that weaves educational equity into its fabric. Principals are responsible for balancing various initiatives given to them by their surrounding school communities, school districts, state expectations, and federal mandates. Some mandates compete and even contradict each other. Therefore, LoBue

(2022) suggested that “internal, collective accountability to the organizations’ shared values should take precedence over meeting unaligned external mandates” (p.12). This does not mean that principals should ignore the mandates. Instead, school leaders may find it helpful to leverage aspects of the mandates to develop internal accountability. The school principal must find ways to balance accountability with the commitment to educational equity.

Once leaders establish a core for educational equity in their buildings, professional learning is another way to support this culture. Educators should create collaborative learning teams that evaluate why certain groups of students are not learning as much as others. One suggestion is for leaders to cater to two interrelated types of professional development: subject matter expertise and social identity development. Involving staff at all levels and sharing leadership were standard practices throughout this integrated approach (Poekert et al., 2020).

Equity in the Classroom

Only 35% of students nationwide develop proficient reading skills by fourth grade (The Nation’s Report Card, 2022). These achievement gaps do not begin in fourth grade. The case has been made about the benefits of early interventions through a multi-tiered process. The most distilled essential components of reading instruction are phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Fien et al., 2021). However, knowing the curriculum and pedagogical approaches is not enough. In the current state of education, relationships matter. Teacher-student relationships characterized by higher levels of closeness and lower levels of conflict demonstrate more optimal outcomes (Ansari et al., 2020, p. 101).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

"Teachers need professional learning opportunities on culturally responsive teaching, research-based resources, and time and a safe space to grow and develop teacher capacity and

awareness of the disparities that exist for students with diverse social identities and support teachers with using inclusive teaching practices (Addy et al., 2021). Educators can increase the academic achievement of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and social-class student groups by employing culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2018). Krasnoff (2016) makes a case for addressing the pervasive achievement gap with culturally responsive pedagogy.

A mandate for change requires that racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students have the opportunity to meet their learning challenges with the strength and relevance found in their own cultural frame of reference. Therefore, teachers must be prepared with a thorough understanding of the specific cultures of the students they teach, how that culture affects student learning behaviors, and how they can change classroom interactions and instruction to embrace the differences. (p. 1)

When considering learning outcomes, educators must first locate evidence. Hattie (2005) argued that the evidence that makes a difference in teaching and learning must be located at the ‘teacher’ level. Changing instructional practices begins at the local school level and involves consistent, reflective, and timely professional development in Culturally Responsive Teaching. The researcher discusses professional development in more detail later in the review. The following section focuses on defining Culturally Responsive Teaching.

Educational Heritage

This action research aims to investigate potential educational practices that could contribute to reducing the racial academic achievement gap in elementary schools. When considering the racial academic achievement gap, it is essential to take into account the historical context that has shaped the educational experience, specifically for lower-performing racial groups. This part of the literature focuses on the historical context of Black children and Black teachers and the evolution of their educational experience from 1865 to now.

Less than 200 years ago, in 1800-1835, southern states proactively created legislation that criminalized teaching Black children to read and write. There is no marked time between slavery and freedom (Anderson, 1988). In 1865, after the Civil War ended, Blacks were thrust into a state of emancipation with no real federal plan for the transition of enslaved Africans into free society. The federal government undermined Reconstruction efforts, thus ruthlessly disenfranchising Blacks by 1870 (Anderson, 1988). Thus, Black education was developed within the economic and political context during the end of Reconstruction in the 1960s. Givens (2021) described this time in education.

For African American teachers, educating Black students was about more than developing ordinary academic skill sets. It was fundamentally about challenging and transcending antiblack sentiments that structured the known world. While excelling in various content areas might have been the starting place for some teachers, a primary learning objective for Black school teachers as a professional class was to help students understand the urgent demand to make the world anew. This distinction must be appreciated when considering the art of Black teaching. This was their starting place; this political clarity was a shared understanding and the foundation of their work (p. 159).

King (1993) summarized that African American teachers brought a unique teaching philosophy and pedagogy to the classroom that built upon teaching and learning cultural preferences. Moreover, King (1993) noted that African American teachers often served as role models, surrogate parents, disciplinarians, counselors, and advocates for African American students. By their presence, they conveyed to Black schoolchildren the expectation that they could and would succeed.

However, after *Brown vs Board of Education*, the population of Black teachers was drastically reduced. Pre-Brown, before 1954, approximately 82,000 African American teachers were responsible for educating two million African American children. Between 1954 and 1965, more than 38,000 African American teachers and administrators in 17 southern and border states lost their jobs (Milner & Howard, 2004). Some were fired because of their skin complexion, some teachers with lighter skin tones were moved to integrated schools, and the best teachers were taken from Black schools and moved to white schools. The idea was that the Black teachers with lighter complexions connected more to the White students and teachers (Milner & Howard, 2004). They were perceived as less of a threat to other White teachers, White community members, and the 'all White' segregated schools.

Contrastingly, Black teachers with darker complexions were likened to that teacher's ability to teach effectively. Moreover, after skin color pigmentation was considered, the "best" Black teachers were forced to move into integrated schools. Not only were teachers moved from predominately Black schools, but Black division heads were also moved, and some were demoted to base-level positions. Principals were repositioned to specifically oversee discipline for Black boys, resulting in Black boys viewing school leadership as something to be feared and not someone to admire or look to for mentorship (Milner & Howard, 2004).

Between 1984 and 1989, 37,717 minority candidates and teachers, including 21,515 African Americans, were eliminated due to newly installed teacher education program admissions and teacher certification requirements (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). It was reported that forty years after *Brown vs Board of Education*, most U.S. students went through 12 years of schooling without ever having met a minority teacher, and approximately 70% of all minority students attended predominantly or exclusive minority schools (Hawkins, 1994). Hudson and

Holmes (1994) argued that the loss of African American teachers in public school settings had a lasting negative impact on all students, particularly African American students, and the communities in which they reside. They further lamented that “[operating] a public school system without Black teachers is [like teaching] White supremacy without saying a word” (Hudson & Holmes, 1994, p. 388).

Culturally Responsive Teaching Defined

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) can be understood by looking at the definition, competencies, and essential factors of the ideology. Geneva Gay, who is noted as the creator of cultural responsiveness as a practice, described Culturally Responsive Teaching as a routine and radical paradigm needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups by teaching to and through their personal and cultural strengths their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments (Gay, 2018). Gay (2018) defined Culturally Responsive Teaching as:

Using 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. Culturally responsive teaching is the behavioral expressions of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning (p. 36).

Gloria Ladson-Billings, one of the pioneers in this work, coined the term Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). CRT and CRP are synonymous but not interchangeable. Ladson-Billings (2021) defined CRP as a pedagogy of opposition to assimilationist teaching designed to help students fit into the existing social order but instead celebrate the unique culture of individual students. It rests on three criteria: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and maintain cultural competence; (c) students must develop critical

consciousness to challenge the status quo. Gay and Ladson-Billings make a clear case for the significance of CRT and CRP. Although the definition difference is nuanced, the three pillars of both can be summarized as high expectations in student learning, cultural awareness of self and others, and social justice. Their explanations include the important connection between culture and cognition, but Hammond's (2015) definition uses slightly more language that addresses the cognitive side of CRT(P). For that reason, this study used the following culturally responsive teaching definition:

An educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection with the student in order to create a safe space for learning (Hammond, 2015, p. 15).

This definition was under intense scrutiny at the time of this study, resulting in heated debates. Some parents and educators do not believe it is beneficial for race to be pointed out in the classroom. Some educators do not believe CRT is needed when students of color perform well. However, even when students of color are successful, educators must avoid boosting the possibility of their success at the expense of their cultural well-being (Fordham, 1988). Students may believe they must assimilate into the dominant culture, standing apart from their African American peers so that teachers do not attribute to them the negative characteristics attributed to students of color in general. Instead, Teel and Obidah (2008) added value to this approach and offer the following competencies of culturally responsive teaching:

- Seeing cultural differences as assets
- Creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued
- Using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies, and relationships with students
- Challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression
- Being change agents for social justice and academic equity
- Mediating power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class
- Accepting cultural responsiveness as essential to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups

Although the differences between culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy are nuanced, one must not confuse them with another popular educational term that includes cultural self-awareness as one of its pillars. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a term that is mistakenly used synonymously with CRT and CRP. SEL programs create opportunities for schools to recognize and serve young people exposed to contemporary and historical trauma. Mahfouz and Anthony-Stevens (2020) acknowledged there is concern that uncritical discussions of social and emotional well-being may pathologize trauma or mark marginalized youth as damaged without consideration of the complex cognitive, political, and social ecologies dominated by Eurocentric bias. To confront these limitations, a proposal to consider is adopting an interdisciplinary lens to integrate culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy into SEL programs for marginalized and minoritized students (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).

Culturally responsive teaching makes a bid for education that is beyond equal but more equitable. Duncan-Andrade (2007) described an equal education as all students receiving the same thing and often measured by the same standardized assessments. He describes equitable education as resources allocated based on context that pay closer attention to the specific needs of a community. Duncan (2007) continued that equitable education is better defined as a culturally relevant education. It is designed to address the material conditions of the lives of students while maintaining a high level of intellect and rigor (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

It will take years to reform ingrained practices like standardized testing. In the meantime, there is hope that current curricular practices rooted in cultural responsiveness will balance marginalized students meeting assessment benchmarks of the dominant culture while simultaneously raising awareness of how their cultural history and language influence them (Cherfas et al., 2021). Defining the power of professional development that will develop teacher awareness and capacity to become a culturally responsive teacher is vitally important. School leadership is essential in defining this approach.

It is crucial for school leaders to first understand the racial structurization through institutional and historical lenses that shape educational outcomes concerning the student achievement gap. Based on a case study of several principals in high-needs schools, principal leadership was positively impacted when they understood and interacted with multi-level contextual factors (Murakami et al., 2019). Understanding this background information helps school leaders further mold beliefs about the need for culturally responsive teaching and professional learning.

Professional Development

Research confirms that the most significant factor contributing to student academic success is the quality of teaching (Johnston et al., 2021). Teaching quality has a more substantial influence on student achievement than any other factor in education by a wide margin (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Rivkin et al., 2005; Thompson & William, 2007). There are many ways a school leader can improve teacher quality. School leaders can help teachers grow through consistent feedback, leveraging the evaluation system, creating a safe and welcoming school culture, and providing adequate resources.

Mizell (2017) argued that professional development is the most effective strategy schools and school districts must use to ensure effective teaching happens daily for every child. Professional development increases the probability that educators continue to strengthen their practice throughout their careers and can be approached differently by teachers. Teachers can participate in self-directed study using synchronous or asynchronous online training, support from a local school coach, and with a team or grade level. The McKinsey report (2007) noted four successful approaches to growing and developing quality instruction:

1. Coaching classroom practice
2. Developing strong “instructional” school leaders
3. Building teacher training programs in the classroom
4. Enabling teachers to learn from each other (Professional Learning Teams)

For this study, the ARDT referred to the professional development team approach. Quality teaching results from a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to collaborate to improve student learning beyond what an individual can achieve alone; it is not an isolated accomplishment (Carroll, 2009). Teachers must receive quality professional development from

adept and skilled facilitators who can foster reflective environments that grow teacher capacity to impact student achievement.

Leading school improvement involves a clear implementation plan for professional development that is thoroughly understood in the building. A precise alignment between the district and local school professional development plans can increase clarity and purpose, positively impacting staff engagement during professional development. Job-embedded professional development is preferred because it directly connects professional learning with classroom application, resulting in student achievement; quality and job-embedded professional development can lead to higher student outcomes (Basma & Savage, 2017). Principals impact the professional development culture of their schools. “Instructionally centered leaders establish an expectation that the continual expansion of one’s knowledge and skills focused on helping students succeed is the norm at the school” (Murphy, 2015, p. 76).

Historicity of Post-Slavery Professional Development for Black Teachers

Between 1861 and the 1920s, Black teachers created learning opportunities for themselves to resist attempts to stifle their development. The Ohio Colored Teachers Organization met in December 1961 and noted that for 10 years, Black teachers were laser-focused and intentional in preparing themselves for the responsibilities of the schoolroom (Givens, 2021). During Reconstruction, the efforts of Black professionals to organize and facilitate their professional development began to conflict with intrusive support from white missionaries and white philanthropists who sought to offer guidance during the earliest days of institutional development for Black educators.

By WWI, these organizations gained almost all control over the institutional development of black teachers, including teacher training (Watkins, 2001). “Let us make the teachers, and we

will make the people” was a quote from General Samuel Armstrong, a white Union soldier turned educator who founded the Hampton Institute, a legendary training ground for Black educators. He was considered one of the “white architects of Black education,” mirroring the paternalistic attitudes of whites who felt it was their duty to develop those they regarded as lesser races after the Civil War. Armstrong maintained that it was the duty of the superior white race to rule over the weaker dark-skinned races until they were appropriately civilized. Armstrong estimated that this civilization process would require several generations of moral and religious development (Anderson, 1988).

From its inception, the American public education system was intentionally designed to produce inequitable educational outcomes between affluent and low-income children as well as between White and linguistically and racially diverse students. Schools were “social reproduction” institutions, meaning they were structured to recreate society’s social, economic, and racial stratifications (Hammond, n.d., p.3). The Hampton Institution trained teachers to develop compliant, efficient workers. According to Givens (2021), “the suppression and manipulation of black teacher training would be an intentional strategy to perpetuate white supremacy in the era of Jim Crow” (p. 163). Consequently, professional development became an ongoing and, at times, covert process to develop and protect Black educators who sought to go against the dominant expectation for Black educators and strategize despite white attempts to control their efforts. Many educational organizations for Black teachers made professional development a priority that was not a top-down approach.

One of the leading voices in this work was Carter G. Woodson. Educators collaborated with thought leaders like Carter G. Woodson to reimagine the curricular foundations of black schooling. They considered this type of professional development an ethical obligation of their

professional group (Givens, 2021). Woodson insisted that it took 20 years to recover from his Harvard education indoctrination (Givens, 2021). It was precisely the orientation other programs initiated Black teachers into that shaped their systems of beliefs and values and how their training and its influence impacted their approach to instruction (Givens, 2021).

In 1965, 10 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and nearly one hundred years after the conclusion of the Civil War, Congress passed ESEA to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by directing federal funds to schools that served high concentrations of low-income children. Unfortunately, it was not that easy. ESEA faced an extraordinary challenge: attempting to reform a system carefully designed to impede centralized power (Hess & Eden, 2017). The sentiment is not that Black students need Black teachers to succeed. However, considerations for the statistics are that the American educational system is populated by a majority of White teachers in an institutional context where White students continue to show student achievement well above Black children. What educational heritage did linguistically and racially diverse students lose when the Europeanized approach to education became the norm for all racial sectors of education? The dominant culture redesigned and contextualized teacher training/professional development programs to impede, minimize, and sometimes stop altogether equal and equitable educational success for all students.

This dissertation centers on professional development. The purpose of including the topics of Black heritage and the historicity of professional development in the United States is to identify that although the current intentions of educators and the dominant voice in education may not be to oppress minoritized people or derail student achievement, if not considered and understood that the foundation of professional development for teachers in America was rooted in the minimization of progress for marginalized groups of children, then educators

unintentionally continue to keep a system devised to limit the success of a particular people, operating as it was designed. This exemplifies from the very beginning that the people in question are not minorities, but they have been minoritized and marginalized since the inception of post-slavery education. The model of control and oppression, although specifically referring to Black people in this reference, is the same line of thinking that impacts other subgroups where the dominant culture wants to maintain superiority overall.

Chapter Summary

This chapter highlighted how the academic achievement gap continues to be an issue in educational equity. “Ethnic and racial disparities in educational outcomes, such as test scores, are a core issue of educational research” (Lorenz, 2021, para 1). Many efforts have been made at the national, state, and local school levels to tackle this pervasive problem. Disenfranchised students, because of race, English language proficiency, or low socioeconomic status, are underdeveloped because of inequity by design, which leads to a lack of consistent, equitable learning environments.

The literature review explored the topic of culturally responsive teaching and how being a culturally responsive educator impacts the achievement gap. The three central tenets of culturally responsive teaching are high expectations, cultural awareness, and social justice. Banks (2021) noted that culturally responsive teaching is not just about teaching methods; it is a whole philosophy. It is based on core beliefs about education and a deep commitment to student achievement. Culturally responsive practice goes beyond simply talking about student success; it works to make it happen. Culturally responsive teaching was described as a mindset shift, not specific tasks to be completed. Studies found that when students experienced teachers who believed in them at high levels, they tended to perform better (Lorenz, 2021). Culturally

responsive teaching is a term coined and studied in recent years by researchers Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and Zaretta Hammond.

When considering the newness of the term and lack of coursework on the topic at the college prep level, professional development for current education professionals is a tool to explore. Professional Development is the primary source of learning that teachers receive. The impact on student achievement is strongly influenced by the quality of professional development for teachers (Soine & Lumpe, 2014). In most cases, professional development in education is job-embedded learning that happens during 30-60-minute meetings that take place during the day or after school. The literature review explored how professional learning centered around a problem of practice that garners more buy-in and engagement from teacher participants.

This study used an action research approach to investigate what happens to the perception, job performance, and student experience when a group of educators participates in a professional development series on culturally responsive teaching. Using the literature, the researcher identified the problem of practice in educational equity and the interventions, studying cultural responsiveness in professional development. Chapter 3 details the cyclical action research process.

CHAPTER 3

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Academic achievement is one of the most significant indicators for gauging student success and education (Ye et al., 2019). In the United States, this continues to be hard to gauge for students of color because of inequities that lead to the academic achievement gap. School leaders are responsible for promoting and fostering educational experiences that prioritize the cultural and unique learning needs of multilingual, low-income, or students of color who have been historically marginalized (Gooden et al., 2023). Some school leaders do this by implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is a set of beliefs teachers have about the science of learning, students, themselves, and relationship building. These mindsets frame classroom experiences, improving student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, paving the way to improved student performance (Ladson-Billings, 2021). However, school leaders should not hold teachers accountable for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices unless teachers have explicit instruction through professional development. Professional development is essential in improving the academic performance of underdeveloped and underachieving students of color (Gay, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of elementary school teachers as they learned and implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms, specifically in reading and math. This study investigated the perspectives of the leader facilitating professional learning and observing the implementation of culturally responsive

teaching, the implications of underperforming subgroups of students, and the impact of professional learning on the student achievement gap.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?

Chapter 3 explores the logic model that guided the study, explains the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis, and discusses the study's reliability, validity, and trustworthiness.

Rationale of Qualitative Research Design

In K-12 education, data is collected throughout the year, usually cyclically. The most accessible types of data for stakeholders are typically quantitative. However, the human experience, motivations, and viewpoints are disguised or missed in quantitative data, and qualitative research provides insights into the human experience that can benefit a researcher (Glanz, 2014, p. 80). In this study, the researcher sought to investigate the subtleties and depth of human cognition and behavior, delving deeply into complicated phenomena by collecting and

analyzing data to understand the perspectives of teachers in an urban elementary school participating in professional development, studying culturally responsive teaching practices.

The researcher chose qualitative research over quantitative because of the subtle meanings, patterns, and themes found when researchers use focus groups, observations, and interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative study on designing culturally responsive science education through professional development used interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires (Brown & Crippen, 2016). Creating complete theories, guiding policy decisions, and creating successful interventions depend on this depth of understanding.

By its very nature, action research is a qualitative approach. “It emphasizes comprehending and resolving real-world issues within particular contexts by thoroughly examining the experiences and viewpoints of individuals” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 69). Researchers used qualitative techniques, including observations, document analysis, and interviews, to collect detailed, descriptive data. In this study, the researcher used qualitative techniques and later examined the data for trends, themes, and meanings to develop a deeper understanding of the issue and implications of future considerations.

The cyclical process of qualitative inquiry and the iterative nature of action research, which involves continuous reflection and improvement, are highly compatible. Action research is a qualitative methodology that enables practitioners to conduct studies on their practices, resulting in better results. According to Maxwell (2021), explanations based on qualitative methods are typically framed in terms of events, meanings, processes, contexts, and how these interact to shape outcomes. The researcher analyzes the study findings and offers suggestions for the next steps based on the outcomes of Chapters 4 and 5.

Overview of Action Research Methods

Action research is a hands-on approach to discovering more about a topic or problem of practice. This approach is highly beneficial in education and similar to professional development learning models. Masters (1995) quotes Lewin's argument that to "understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry" (p.1). Action research, like collaborative learning teams in education, includes many voices and experts to examine a problem of practice and choose a research method that probes deeper to locate more information and ways that may help address that problem of practice. Early on, action research was met with mixed reviews, some even believing it was an unrealistic and ineffective approach to educational research. However, it has been identified as an ideal way for educators in different roles to work together to understand their work more, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data (Glanz, 2014).

Action research was appropriate for this study because it tests what educators sometimes feel they intuitively know (Glanz, 2014). It allowed teams to spend time with an acute focus on an issue not generally discussed during weekly planning team meetings. The process allowed them to gather evidence to define the problem, consequently influencing a hypothesis for the team and empowering them to explore various strategies on the job (Corey, 1954). As an organized group of researchers, they routinely checked in and reflected on the impact of the implemented approaches to the problem of practice.

The achievement gap continues to be a general problem of practice researched globally. It has become an area of focus at a suburban elementary school in Metro Washington County. Action research made room for elementary school staff participants and the researcher to ruminate on what could be the cause of students in certain demographic groups performing

significantly lower than their peers. The action research team specifically focused on identifying if culturally responsive practices positively impacted student performance in underperforming groups, the impact on teacher capacity in culturally responsive teaching, and the overall impact of professional development on teacher practice.

Data collection for this study incorporated qualitative and quantitative methods. These methods included:

1. Researcher journal notes based on observations of PLC meetings and classroom observations;
2. Pre and post-survey of teacher self-efficacy in the area of culturally responsive teaching and overall impact on student achievement;
3. Periodic teacher reflection responses that provide perspective of the teachers' progress;
4. Interviews with both teacher and researcher periodically throughout the action research;
5. District assessment and common assessment achievement scores in reading.

The researcher adequately addressed the research questions using the qualitative data collection methods. The data aligned with the research problem, questions, and theoretical framework (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) concluded, "A final principle of action research is that the researchers and coinvestigators collect and analyze multiple forms of data systematically as the research process unfolds" (p.52). The researcher collected and analyzed data during each two-week cycle to begin organizing and coding the information into themes.

Action Research Design

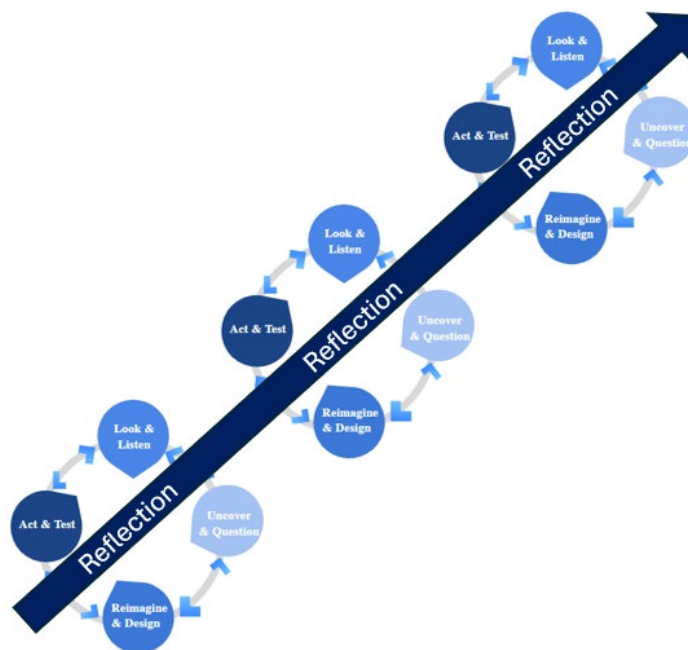
Throughout the study, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) spiraled through a combination of the Deming and Equity transformational model of observing, analyzing, problem-solving, testing, and refining. To improve practice, action research allowed a collaborative, cyclical inquiry process involving educators methodically thinking about and acting upon their professional situation. This Boston Academy study entailed determining an issue, which was closing the academic achievement gap, creating and implementing culturally responsive practice treatments, gathering and evaluating data to determine their effects using reflective questionnaires, and then considering the results to guide future steps for group discussions during the professional development series. By encouraging an ongoing learning cycle, this iterative approach enabled practitioners to become researchers in their practice. As a result of including various stakeholders on the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), the action research fostered a sense of ownership for the changes made during the professional development series.

The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research

Action research is a qualitative design that addresses problems in social systems like schools. Its scientific tools are applied in ways that enable research participants to work collectively to resolve an issue within their organization (Bloomberg, 2023, p.101). As seen in Figure 3.1 below, action research is an iterative process, meaning that the identified testing cycle repeats over multiple examinations.

Figure 3.1

The Spiraling Nature of Action Research



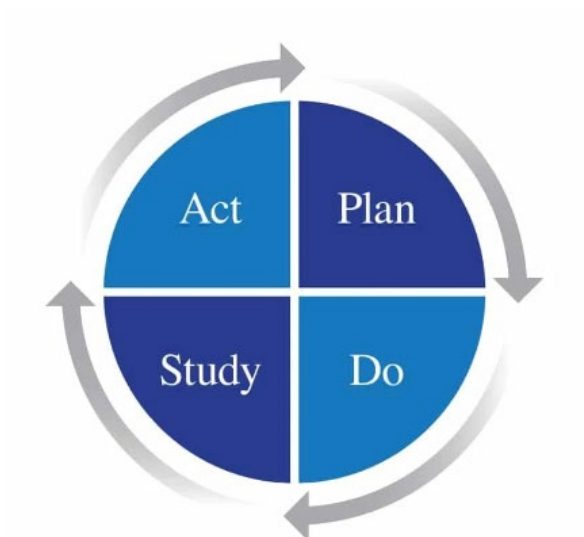
Coghlan (2019) described evaluating action research as a spiraling approach, where multiple action research cycles happen, sometimes at different periods but always threading reflection throughout. Figure 3.1 illustrates this concept. The ARDT, through collaborative focus groups, designed and guided the implementation of the cycles by the ARIT throughout the study. In order to provide a deeper understanding of a situation and inform future action, the research process was iterative, cyclical, and participatory. The process began with conceiving and particularizing the problem and proceeded through several data collection methods like interviews, evaluations, and reflections (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 101).

The ARDT and ARIT followed the spiraling nature of action research similarly. The ARDT used preliminary school questionnaires on cultural competence to design and anchor the professional development series flow and framework. With beginning and Mid-point design

sessions, the ARDT used the data collected from the ARIT cycle implementation to inform the direction of the remaining sessions in the series. The real-time updates from the ARDT aligned with Coghlan (2019), who cautioned researchers that no matter how well the project is designed in advance, its unfolding may not always comply with the original design. This was evidenced during the cycles when guiding feedback was provided to the researcher from the ARDT on which way to proceed in the professional development series.

Logic Model

The researcher framed this study, which examined the perspectives of elementary educators learning about culturally responsive practices in a professional development series in a continuous improvement cycle (Bryk et al., 2015). The logic model for this study was built on the Deming (1993) PDSA Cycle, combined with the Equity Transformation Cycle created by Safir and Dugan (2021). Figure 3.2 shows the Deming (1993) model, and Figure 3.3 shows the Safir and Dugan (2021) model.

Figure 3.2*PDSA Cycle*

Note: Adapted from Deming (1993).

Figure 3.3*Equity Transformational Cycle*

Note: Adapted from Safir and Dugan (2021).

Both models represent a fluid yet structured and spiraling process for participants to iterate on their ideas and build the capacity to respond to change in a liberatory change model. The combination that made up the logic model used in this study, as shown in Figure 3.2,

provided a structured process for the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) that included listening, questioning, designing, acting, testing, and reflecting, which moved the action research forward. In this study, the researcher was interested in learning how the perspectives of a leader and a teacher team were impacted based on engaging in professional development about culturally responsive practices.

Glanz (2014) stated that educational leaders, as action researchers, are constantly seeking ways to improve the school by implementing and assessing instruction, and action research provides the means to meet those targets. Additionally, because of the nature of the research, this logic model was undergirded by the principles of social constructivism. Race as a social construct is an underlying disposition in this research. Students at the margins continue to underperform compared to students who make up the dominant culture. “In the context of schools and collaborative teams, the research considers subjective meanings, personal experiences, and contexts in which people live and work to understand particular cultural and historical settings” (Bloomberg, 2023, p.78).

Theory of Change

The study examined the perspectives of educators on an Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) as they learned about culturally responsive practices that can positively impact marginalized students. The study is anchored on a Ready for Rigor framework designed by Hammond, encompassing four central tenets of culturally responsive practices: cultural awareness, relationships, information processing skills, and community (Hammond, 2015). The ARDT considered the intersection of three voices: how the system works, what empirical research suggests about promising changes, and what seems realistic to educators who might try these changes in their classroom settings (Bryk et al., 2015). With these questions in mind, the

ARDT designed a job-embedded professional learning opportunity for educators to investigate ways to close the racial achievement gap at Boston Academy.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that the researchers and co-investigators participate systematically in collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data in the inquiry/research process. Aligning with the purpose of the study and the overarching research questions, the researcher situated the theory of change in best practice for adult education. The professional development prioritized straightforward applications, instruction with concrete, realistic goals, and a process of self-reflection where teachers could effectively evaluate their progress toward their teaching goals (Popova et al., 2021).

The Case

The case for this study further explores the disproportionality in the successful performance of white students compared to marginalized students. Given that teacher PD tends to enhance student learning and achievement, educational leaders, theorists, and researchers have focused on enhancing the quality of teaching to improve student learning and achievement (Sancar et al., 2021). The context of this study took place in an urban elementary school where staff first signed up for a professional development series of their choice. Because of the sensitivity of the topic and the facilitator being the school principal, the ARDT questioned how to ensure that participants in the class genuinely desired to learn the content and did not feel pressure to attend due to the facilitator. As a result, the PD series was offered as an option among four other sessions. A registration link was sent to participants who chose one of the four options: Reading Strategies Session, Creative Thinking Strategies Session, Canva/TikTok Strategies Session, and Culturally Responsive Strategies Session. The registration link did not list the names of the facilitators.

The study investigated the reflections of educators in real time as they learned about culturally responsive practices. The series was structured so participants would learn, discuss, and experience culturally responsive practices. They would then commit to implementing a practice and recording their reflections through a questionnaire. As outlined by Glanz (2014), individual, collaborative, and schoolwide are three forms of action research, allowing educators to investigate areas of concern in their classrooms. The distinction is arbitrary.

Binding the experiences of various educators that impact learners in primary and intermediate language learners and students in the multi-tiered systems of support helped to acutely interrogate the impact of culturally responsive teaching practices on various student audiences. The school principal led the action research process, thus making this a qualitative case study where the team searched for meaning and understanding. At the same time, the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2016, p. 37).

Action Research Design Team

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) comprised school personnel who were local school equity team members. This equity team was part of a 3-school partnership within the Washington Public Schools district that participated in a 3-year learning pilot on becoming culturally responsive educational leaders. Like action research, this team was designed to focus on a problem of practice. “It used cyclical research, reflection, and action processes to evaluate the impact of hypothesized solutions to complex problems” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 157). The team included the researcher, school leaders, and grade-level chairs.

The primary researcher served as the Boston Academy principal and had a vested interest in the impact of culturally responsive teaching practices in closing the achievement gap with historically marginalized student groups. The design team members combined 55 years of

experience in the group, with some having over 20 years of experience and some having novice experience with as little as four years of experience. The design team was balanced with an instructional coach, school counselor, kindergarten teacher, 5th-grade teacher, and language support teacher.

Ms. Adara, the 5th-grade department chair, has four years of experience teaching Math, Science, and Spanish Literacy in the Dual Language Immersion program. With her Mexican heritage and passion for English learners, Ms. Adara contributed fresh and exciting ideas to Boston Academy. Ms. Gifford, a 3rd-year teacher, kindergarten team lead, and an English teacher with dual language immersion experience who taught all subjects, expressed the desire to learn more about culturally responsive practices before the research team was developed.

Mr. Whitford, the most unfamiliar with the course topic, was an instructional coach at Boston Academy who had worked there for 18 years. He brought a historical perspective, having served under all four school principals. As a neighborhood resident, he also brought insights into how gentrification impacted the community and the school. Mr. Stuart has 10 years of teaching experience and eight years of school counseling experience. He oversaw an African Rites of Passage group for young Black men in his spare time. Ms. Ramirez was an instructional coach with 10 years of education experience, all as a Dual Language Immersion educator. Table 3.1 lists the members of the Action Research Design Team and their subsequent roles in this study.

Table 3.1*Action Research Design Team*

Team Member	Primary Role at Boston Academy	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Principal	Led and conducted all research in collaboration with the design team for data analysis. Brought 10 years of previous coaching experience to the team.
Allie Adara	5 th Grade Teacher	Provided teacher lens for intermediate learners.
Bria Gifford	Kindergarten Teacher	Provided teacher lens for primary learners.
Sal Whitford	Instructional Coach	Provided context and historical understanding of the progression of culture and gentrification as a founding school member.
Dan Stuart	School Counselor	Provided experience in social-emotional learning and impact on adolescent students dealing with vulnerable topics.
Helena Ramirez	Dual Language Immersion Instructional Coach	Provide experiences from Latinx and Hispanic cultures working with ESOL students. Brought five years of experience as a bilingual literacy teacher.

The ARDT was diverse in gender, ethnicity, experience, and knowledge of the topic, reflecting the diverse culture of the school. The action research design team members were chosen as leaders on the equity leadership team, extended leadership team, or both. These leaders

previously exhibited a commitment to professional learning and high levels of influence amongst the staff.

During the first ARDT meeting, the team reviewed preliminary data based on a cultural competence questionnaire the staff completed at the start of the year. They were provided with the purpose of the study, research questions, timeline, and ARDT and ARIT roles. The ARDT collaborated to choose the framework of the culturally responsive practice “Ready for Rigor” to guide the sessions in the series.

Action Research Implementation Team

During the first semester of the 2023 school year, the researcher emailed Boston Academy staff members about the professional development choice sessions. There were four options that staff members could voluntarily enroll in during the semester one series. Staff members who signed up for the courses were sent confirmation and information about the location, time, and the name of the facilitator. Participants were informed about the study in the first class and were asked for consent. After reading the details outlined in the consent letter, all class members agreed to enlist as action research participants on the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT).

The participants were chosen because of their direct contact with children in the educational setting, their diverse demographic make-up, and their interest in the research topic before knowing the facilitator was the principal and lead researcher. This was in alignment with the action research design. Bloomberg (2023) offered that professionals in the education sector can find value and benefit in an action research model because of its democratic nature and the ambiguity between the researcher and participants as they participate in collaborative inquiry.

The ARIT participated in a professional development series to learn about culturally responsive teaching practices that benefit all learners, specifically marginalized and historically low-performing students. In the series, participants learned, practiced, and discussed practices and then selected one CRT and CRP practice per session to go back and implement with students. After each cycle, participants were given a reflective questionnaire to reflect on the impact of the implemented CRTP strategy on teachers and students.

The ARIT was made up of four classroom teachers: two teachers from 5th grade, one teacher from 4th grade, and one teacher from kindergarten; three support teachers: one ESOL teacher, one Behavior Coach, one Art Teacher; and the Dual Language Immersion Coach who was the administration team member. Before the ARIT, the action research participants joined in professional development in culturally responsive teaching, and the school participated in learning about the topic. The team provided a diverse perspective of culture, level, subject, and approach to implementing the practices. Because of the size of Boston Academy, a unique feature of the ARIT is that three participants, Ms. Adara, Ms. Gifford, and Ms. Ramirez, also served on the ARDT. Table 3.2 lists the members of the ARIT, the subject areas they support, and their teaching experience.

Table 3.2

Action Research Implementation Team

Culturally Responsive Professional Development Participant	Grade Level/Department	Teaching Experience
Aditi Abdul	Behavior Coach	10 - 19 years
Allie Adara	5 th Grade Teacher	20+ years
Bria Gifford	Kindergarten Teacher	4 - 9 years

Culturally Responsive Professional Development Participant	Grade Level/Department	Teaching Experience
Aleta Gonzalez	4 th Grade Teacher (DLI Spanish)	0 - 3 years
Angela Perez	5 th Grade Teacher (DLI Spanish)	4 - 9 years
Helena Ramirez	Dual Language Immersion Instructional Coach	10 - 19 years
Samantha Service	Art Teacher	4 - 9 years
Evan Wade	ESOL	10 - 19 years

Research Plan and Timeline

The timeline for the research followed what Coghlan (2019) described as congruent cycles of action research. He likened the action research to a clock, explaining that the project parts have different periods. Where the entire study might follow the hour hand, an interview or questionnaire might happen on the minute hand cycle. Undergirding the entire research plan was reflective action, as seen in Table 3.3. Glanz (2014) described reflective action as a sustained improvement that develops only from continuous reflection and action.

Table 3.3

Action Research Timeline

Date	Action Research Activity	
	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)
December 2023	- Secured consent to participate - Initial overview meeting - Researcher's Journal-record data/reflections	- Secured consent to participate - Pre-Questionnaire - Sign up for choice sessions - Culturally Responsive Professional Development Intro Session

Date	Action Research Activity	
	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)
January 2024	1. Update Meeting on any changes to the design 2. TLA Equity Leadership Team Professional Learning Sessions	3. Culturally Responsive Professional Development Contextualizing: Awareness 4. Artifact Collection
February 2024	• TLA Equity Leadership Team Professional Learning Sessions	• Culturally Responsive Professional Development Cycle 1: Information Processing • Participant Reflection Questionnaire
March 2024	• TLA Equity Leadership Team Professional Learning Sessions • Mid Cycle Meeting • Researcher's Journal-record data/reflections	• Culturally Responsive Professional Development Cycle 2: Information Processing & Learning Partnerships • Participant Reflection Questionnaire
April 2024	• TLA Equity Leadership Team Professional Learning Sessions • End of Study Meeting	• Culturally Responsive Professional Development Cycle 3: Community of Learners & Learning Environment • Focus Group

Context of the Study

Boston Academy is an urban PreK-5th grade elementary school in the Washington Public Schools (WPS) metropolitan area. The Academy is a public school of 40 schools in a major city in the WPS charter school system. Although small in diameter, the city has an estimated 500,000 residents, with several surrounding school districts that account for the metro area. All schools in WPS are charter schools serving an estimated 50,000 students. Nestled in a close community in the North Washington Cluster, Boston Academy consistently served approximately 500 students

yearly, with steady enrollment predicted. WPS divided their schools into clusters based on the feeder high school, with Boston Academy in the North Washington Cluster. Over the past few years, the demographics of Boston have changed and are reflected less than the average demographics in Washington Public Schools (WPS).

Student Demographics

At the time of this study, WPS had a student population of 71% African American, 16% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, and the remaining percentage was Multi-Racial or Other. 71% of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunch. The student population looked different from the WPS student demographics.

The student makeup at Boston Academy included 45% Black, 22% Hispanic, 22% White, and 6% Multiracial. The students who qualified for free/reduced lunch represented 32% of the population. Demographics for students receiving instructional program support were balanced, with 13% receiving EL services, 10% receiving Special Education services, and 16% receiving Gifted services. Ten years before the study, the student demographic data differed and reflected 47% African American, 38% Hispanic, 13% White, and 83% of students qualified for free/reduced lunch. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) showed a slow change within the student demographics based on the community changes outside of the school. Table 3.4 provides an image of how the ethnic student demographics of Boston changed over time.

Table 3.4

Percentage of Enrollment by Race/Other Subgroups (GOSA)

	2022-2023	2021-2022	2020-21	2019-20	2010-11
Asian	3	2	1	1	0
Black	39	39	37	37	46
Hispanic	25	28	30	30	38

	2022-2023	2021-2022	2020-21	2019-20	2010-11
Native American	0	0	0	0	1
White	24	24	26	26	13
Multiracial	9	8	0	0	2

School History

Boston Academy opened its doors as a one-room school in the Fulling County Public School system in 1865. The school was founded to improve student outcomes. Thirty years later, the school moved to a two-room building, and in 1932, Boston moved to a larger facility. By 1950, after almost 100 years, Boston Academy relocated from the Fulling County Public School System to become a school under the Washington Public Schools. The school district created it as a part of a system improvement plan that dissolved two failing Washington Public Schools.

In 1976, Boston Academy closed and became the location of the metropolitan office for the Regional Education Services Agencies (RESA). The district demolished the building, and Washington Public Schools broke ground to build a new school to replace two other elementary schools in 2002. At the time of this study, Boston Academy had remained open, serving approximately 500 students in prekindergarten through fifth grade for over 20 years. The original one-room building remains in the community, inhabited by a family who continues volunteering at Boston Academy. Throughout its history, Boston Academy has managed to remain a school where students come to receive a high-quality education.

Student Achievement

Boston Academy is a Dual Language Immersion (DLI) school. The Dual Language Immersion Program is a two-teacher, 50/50 model in which students spend half the day learning with English and the other half learning with Spanish. Although 50% of students learn through the DLI model, the signature programming of the school is the International Baccalaureate (IB). Boston Academy has been an IB school since 2010. The IB program develops inquiring,

knowledgeable, and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. The North Washington Cluster is a K-12 IB cluster. It was initiated to offer robust, high-level learning and to improve student outcomes.

In 2018-2019, Boston received an 85.3 out of 100 on the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). Three consecutive years prior to the 85.3, Boston scored a D on the CCRPI. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the state removed the grading system associated with CCRPI and did not report scores in 2020 or 2021. The researcher used the content mastery achievement scoring for comparison in this study. In 2018, the content mastery score was 59.1; in 2019, the content mastery score was 67.6; and in 2023, the content mastery score was 73.5.

As reported in State Insights for the Spring 2023 administration, on the English Language Arts state assessment, 51% of third-grade students received a passing score of proficient or distinguished, 54% of fourth-grade students received a passing score, and 68% of fifth-grade students received a passing score. In Math, 37% of third-grade students received a passing score of proficient or distinguished, 43% of fourth-grade students received a passing score, and 44% of fifth-grade students received a passing score. In 2023, the overall number of students performing proficient or above increased by 11% in ELA and 0% in Math (as measured by Milestones). Table 3.5 shows the trend data for Boston Academy students performing on grade level at the proficient range or above grade level at the distinguished range.

Table 3.5

Percentage of Students Proficient and Distinguished in ELA and Math

	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
ELA Spring 2019	41	48	54
ELA Spring 2022	32	55	48
ELA Spring 2023	51	56	58

	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
Math Spring 2019	43	42	46
Math Spring 2022	42	45	36
Math Spring 2023	37	43	44

At the time of this study, student attendance trended upward. In 2017, student attendance was 78%; in 2018, it was 89%, and by 2019, it was 93%. The student climate data averaged 67%, lower than the staff and parent climate data. The parent climate score average was 87%, and the teacher average was 83%. Similar to the teaching profession, there has been a slight, consistent turnover in staff.

Boston Academy is an elementary school with a variety of instructional options. Although the data showed a marked increase in reading, there was a stark difference in proficiency when reviewing subgroup demographics based on race. In 2022, out of the three tested groups in ELA and Math GMAS, Black and Hispanic students performed the lowest in achievement compared to their White peers in all six tested areas. This uncovered a discrepancy across subgroups on how students perform in English Language Arts at a suburban elementary school. Table 3.6 shows the local school and district trend data for Boston Academy students and WPS students performing on grade level at the proficient range or above grade level at the distinguished range based on ethnic subgroups in reading.

Table 3.6

Percentage of Students Proficient and Distinguished in Reading based on ethnic subgroups

	Boston Grade 3	WPS Grade 3	Boston Grade 4	District Grade 4	Boston Grade 5	District Grade 5
2022 White	52	80	N/A*	80	90	80
2022 Black	29	18	41	18	36	18
2022 Hispanic	16	31	N/A*	31	28	31

	Boston Grade 3	WPS Grade 3	Boston Grade 4	District Grade 4	Boston Grade 5	District Grade 5
2023 White	N/A*	81	80	81	86	81
2023 Black	51	21	45	21	43	21
2023 Hispanic	27	33	39	33	43	33

Note: The sample size is not large enough for a subgroup.

Staff Demographics

The 2022-2023 State Office of Student Accountability reports showed that 63% of the teachers at Boston Academy had a master's degree or higher and had six years or more of teaching experience. Overall, the staff had an average of 13 years of teaching experience, with 23% having 21-30 years of experience. There were 42 certified teachers, 16 support personnel, and two administrators at the time of this study. Of the classroom teachers, 69% were Black, 14% were White, and 16% were Hispanic. It is important to note that the school changed its leadership two years before this study.

In 2021-2022, the administration team comprised the following: The principal was on the staff for four years. It was the first year for the Assistant Principal and Instructional Coach, and the second year for the other Instructional Coach. Although everyone had over 15 years of educational experience, it was a new administration team. In 2022-2023, except for the Assistant Principal, the entire previous administration left the school, and a new principal was appointed, which changed the leadership team composition to include a novice principal, an assistant principal with three years of experience, a veteran instructional coach new to Boston Academy, and a new instructional coach who had recently taught for 20 years.

Data Sources

“Underserving large populations of youth, resulting in stagnant achievement for decades, is not a new educational issue” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 10). The purpose of this study was to

examine the perspectives of elementary school teachers as they learned and implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. Various data sources were used to get a clear, well-rounded view of elementary school teachers and their professional development.

Participants

The study participants were diverse staff members with wide-ranging roles in the building. The group included four classroom teachers represented as two teachers from 5th grade, one teacher from 4th grade, and one teacher from kindergarten; three support teachers who served as an ESOL teacher, behavior coach, or art teacher; and the Dual Language Immersion Coach, who was also an administration team member. The team provided a diverse perspective of culture, level, subject, and approach to implementing the practices. Some participants were also on the school equity leadership team, partnering with two other schools on the impact of implementing culturally responsive practices in schools.

Selection Criteria

During Semester 1 of the 2023 school year, staff members at Boston Academy were emailed about the professional development choice sessions. There were four options that staff members could voluntarily enroll in for the Semester 1 series. Staff members who signed up for the courses were sent confirmation and information about the location, time, and facilitator information. It was important for the researcher to have participants in the class who wanted to learn more about the topic. For that reason, the names of the facilitators were left off the registration so as not to influence people either way to sign up for the course, because the researcher/facilitator was the school principal. Students who registered for the class voluntarily were allowed to participate. Consent for the study was obtained during the opening of the first professional development session.

Data Collection Methods

According to Bloomberg (2023), “Action research is typically participatory and collaborative and can employ quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Qualitative methods include observation, interview, and focus group” (p. 103). The researcher used a qualitative approach to collect and analyze data. “Data are not collected literally but are noticed by the researcher and treated as data through the lens of the theoretical framework, problem, purpose of the study, and research questions” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.106).

Data collection for this study included a variety of qualitative methods. The methods used were the following:

1. Pre- and post-questionnaires that participants completed before and after the professional development series.
2. Reflective questionnaires that participants completed after each implementation cycle.
3. Researcher journal notes based on observations before, during, and after facilitating the professional development sessions.
4. Focus groups were conducted at the middle and end of the professional development series to obtain the perspectives of the study participants.
5. Documents are artifacts that were collected to compare and contrast the implementation across the participants and to corroborate the reflections with artifacts as evidence and further insight.

The researcher analyzed and coded the collected data to determine themes and patterns that emerged from the data points.

Pre and Post Questionnaires

The researcher used a pre-made pre- and post-close-ended questionnaire to assess whether the professional development impacted the knowledge and skills of participants after completing the series. Before starting the professional development session, participants were asked to complete a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) Self-Assessment. The purpose of this document was to be a window into the progress and practice of a culturally responsive and competent educator. The researcher designed the self-assessment and reflective conversations questionnaire to inspire inward reflection to improve equitable and high-achievement outcomes for educators, classrooms, and students. “Questionnaires require uncomplicated implementation and analysis, making them one of the most popular types of data collection in action research” (Glanz, 2014, p. 56).

Reflective Questionnaire

“The two most common types of questionnaires are open-ended and closed-ended, where open-ended questions allow participants to elaborate, and closed-ended questionnaires provide participants with general and structured responses like a Likert scale” (Glanz, 2014, p. 56). As a part of the action research cycle, participants would learn about a culturally responsive practice and experience in class and then commit to a technique to implement within a week following the session. Participants would then complete an open-ended reflective questionnaire after implementing the culturally responsive teaching practice with students. Table 3.7 displays the questions asked on the reflective questionnaire.

Table 3.7*Reflective Questionnaire Questions*

Reflective Questions	
Q1	What technique did you implement?
Q2	How did your audience receive it?
Q3	What is your reflection about the implementation?
Q4	How did the technique improve or impact your practice?

Researcher's Reflection Journal

The researcher recorded reflections in a journal to clarify the noticed data. The journal allowed the researcher to record the various responses, body language, and engagement levels at different session points and reflect on the impact of being the facilitator and leader, which maximized the professional development session. Merriam & Tisdale (2016) described this type of data collection as a critical component where the researcher records the factual descriptions and observations of the participants and personal reactions, feelings, speculations, initial interpretations, and working hypotheses.

Focus Group

The ARIT participated in focus groups. The focus group questions were similar to the reflective questions but with more depth. The idea was that group discussion might make it easier for participants to elaborate on their reflective questionnaire. The researcher thought it was vital to implement focus groups because “participants exchange opinions, they consider their own views in relation to others’, which may encourage them to refine their thoughts...the goal, overall, is to create a candid conversation that addresses, in-depth, the selected topic” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 285). Table 3.8 illustrates the questions that were posed in the focus group.

Table 3.8*Focus Group Questions*

	Questions
Q1	Explain your technique.
Q2	How did you choose it, and why?
Q3	What were the students' reactions?
Q4	What was your perspective on how the students responded?
Q5	How do you think your technique ties into culturally responsive teaching (CRT)?
Q6	What needs to be tweaked for next time?

Documents

Documents contributed to the study. Participants turned in examples of pictures, lessons, protocols, and student photos they took when implementing culturally responsive teaching practices learned during the professional development series. Coghlan (2019) found that studying relevant artifacts was vital to organizational research. Glanz (2014) suggested not overlooking using multimedia when collecting data, as it provides unique qualitative evidence.

Throughout the study, the researcher used diverse data collection methods, resulting in the implementation and revision of interventions for the participants. In the next section, the researcher explains the interventions in more detail.

Interventions

Interventions are spirals of planned action treatments that play a critical role in Action Research (Glanz, 2014; Kemmis et al., 2014). In this study, the ARDT developed, analyzed, and modified the interventions during the implementation cycles. Glanz (2014) defined interventions as “any specific instructional practice, program, or procedure that is implemented by a researcher

in order to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or a group” (p. 64). The ARDT implemented interventions using a cyclical planning, acting, observing, and reflecting framework. Considering that an action research intervention focuses on an individual or group of people, it should be noted that this process was fluid and flexible, not linear, and at times required the researcher to adjust after learning from experiences (Kemmis et al., 2014). The research spiral is reflected earlier in this chapter in Figure 3.2.

The interventions used in this study evolved from school data that showed an achievement gap between racial subgroups and a lack of progress over the years. Researchers like Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Hammond (2015) all suggested that culturally responsive practices in the classroom can improve student achievement. The ARDT wanted to design a professional learning series centered on the teachings of these researchers.

The ARDT wanted participants to be able to learn about culturally responsive practices, teacher biases, the future of Black, Brown, and or impoverished students who do not meet reading proficiency by the fourth grade, and what classroom strategies can be implemented to create psychological safety for children to learn, achieve, and reduce the achievement gap. There is a consensus amongst educators that effective teaching requires mastery of pedagogical skills, yet many teachers were inadequately prepared in college programs to teach ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2002). During the intro sessions, the ARDT analyzed various data sources to develop and adjust the interventions for efficiency and impact.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Professional Development

The ARDT developed the interventions listed in Table 3.9. The team of educators wanted to explore more learning on culturally responsive teaching practices through professional development using Hammond (2015), “*Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain.*” The

learning opportunity was offered to all staff through professional development choice sessions. Staff who selected Culturally Responsive Teaching as a learning session all agreed to participate in the research as the implementation team. Throughout the professional development sessions, participants could implement what they had learned from the session into the following week. Participants would then submit a 3-prompt questionnaire reflecting on the technique they implemented.

Coghlan (2019) encouraged researchers to be intentional about determining how much control the researcher will have in interactive sessions with participants. The researcher noted a lack of engagement in the class and sufficient time for peer interaction after reviewing the researcher's journal notes, direct observations, and collaboration with design team members. Additionally, participation in the implementation of culturally responsive practices was low. The ARDT advised the researcher to restructure the professional development to align with the instructional framework of the school. They believed the restructuring would offer a model and predictability to the learning, ensuring activation, explicit instruction, time for productive struggle, a work session for collaboration, and a closing. The researcher used best practices from the text and aligned the structure to the instructional framework to maximize the delivery and instructional impact of the participants.

Table 3.9

Interventions for Study

Intervention Activity	Target Group	Frequency
Implementation of Culturally Responsive Practices (job-embedded strategies)	ARIT	Weekly over 2 3-week cycles
Professional Development Choice Sessions (structured professional development)	ARIT	Weekly over 2 3-week cycles

Intervention Activity	Target Group	Frequency
aligned to school's instructional framework)		
Observations, Reflections, and Refinement Debrief	ARDT	Before, Mid-Point, and after the ARIT cycles

To understand the impact of the interventions, the researcher used a multifaceted data collocation approach throughout the process. This involved group discussion, direct observations, reflective questionnaires to gather collective insights, the collection of relevant documents, and the keeping of a detailed journal to capture personal observations. The following section will explain the process the researcher used to analyze the collected data.

Data Analysis Methods

Analyzing quantitative data is a straightforward process compared to analyzing qualitative data. Still, the latter proves more difficult for novice researchers, thus emphasizing the importance of coding to yield significant data and insights (Glanz, 2014). Several researchers noted that data collection and analysis are simultaneous processes in qualitative research (Coghlan, 2019; Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach aligns with the spiraling nature of interventions. As the researcher collected and analyzed the data, the ARDT used that information to adjust the methods as needed.

Coding

Earlier in this chapter, the researcher articulated four data collection methods used in this study. Examination of the data collected provided an analytic narrative. Early on, the researcher applied a coding system to organize and manage the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the researcher collected and coded data, referring to the research questions routinely during the process was essential. During the research cycles, the ARDT conducted a close read of the

data collected through reflection surveys, focus groups, and observational data. The insights gained informed the development of the initial codes. This was based on the iterative process prompted by revisiting the data multiple times to identify patterns and recurring themes that arose from the data and coincidentally were aligned with the research questions.

Bloomberg (2023) described coding as cyclical, just like data collection, interventions, and spirals of action. The coding cycle was structured in a three-phase approach where the researcher repeatedly compared, applied, and refined the data coding in ways that lifted themes, making it easier for the researcher to construct meaning (Bloomberg, 2023). To construct meaning and maintain the integrity and validity of the research, the researcher categorized codes as patterns and identified themes that emerged. The researcher built upon those codes by writing illustrative examples, which became research recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.

Thematic Analysis

In this study, data generation and analysis happened concurrently, allowing the researcher to list and sort themes from the weekly reflections into Big Ideas. The researcher used these themes as headers in an Excel sheet, and with the participant names listed in the first column, under the adjacent headers, the researcher placed a research question identifier code under the Big Idea theme that applied to the theme and the coinciding participant. The researcher used the six-phase approach depicted in Table 3.10 to establish validity, reliability, and trustworthiness.

Table 3.10*Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness*

Phases of Thematic Analysis	Means of Establishing Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data	• Prolong engagement with data • Triangulate different data collection modes • Document theoretical and reflective thoughts • Document thoughts about potential codes/themes • Store raw data in well-organized archives • Keep records of all data field notes, transcripts, and reflexive journals
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	• Researcher triangulation • Reflexive journaling • Use of a coding framework • Audit trail of code generation
Phase 3: Searching for themes	• Researcher triangulation • Diagramming to make sense of theme connections • Keep detailed notes about development and hierarchies of concepts and themes
Phase 4: Reviewing themes	• Researcher triangulation • Test for referential adequacy by returning to raw data
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	• Researcher triangulation • Documentation of theme naming
Phase 6: Producing the report	• Describing the process of coding and analysis in sufficient details • Thick descriptions of context • Description of the audit trail • Report on reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study

Note. Adapted from Nowell et al. (2017).

Because qualitative research relies on the interpretation of the researcher, coding is a crucial part of the process and understanding the use of data triangulation. Glanz (2014)

explained that drawing on information from various sources helps ensure the trustworthiness of the data and reduces bias. This topic will be explored further in the next section.

Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

Bloomberg (2023) used credibility, transferability, and confirmability to describe the triangulation criteria, further stating that the qualitative researcher triangulates multiple sources and methods reported as part of the methodology. For this study, using the structured approach of thematic analysis explained in Table 3.11 made the data triangulation clear, ultimately strengthening the reliability and validity, which strengthens the trustworthiness of the study. Additionally, triangulation based on collection and analysis methods aligned with the research questions is presented in Table 3.11.

Table 3.11

Triangulation of Research Methods

Research Questions	Methods of Data Collection	Methods of Data Analysis	Approximate Timeline
RQ 1: What are teachers' descriptions, perceptions, and interpretations of creating and sustaining culturally responsive classrooms?	Pre & Post Questionnaire	Coding/Analysis of Themes	December-April
	Reflective Questionnaire	Coding/Analysis of Themes	January-April
	Focus Group	Coding/Analysis of Themes	January-April
	Researcher Journal Notes	Researcher Reflection	December-April
	Document Review	Coding/Analysis of Themes	January-April
RQ2: What are the behaviors and actions of school leadership while employing culturally responsive practices?	Reflective Questionnaire	Coding/Analysis of Themes	January-April
	Focus Group	Coding/Analysis of Themes	January-April
		Researcher Reflection	December-April

Research Questions	Methods of Data Collection	Methods of Data Analysis	Approximate Timeline
	Researcher Journal Notes		
RQ 3: How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?	Focus Group	Coding/Analysis of Themes	January-April
	Researcher Journal Notes	Researcher Reflection	December-April

This study used multiple methods to establish reliability, validity, and generalizability. As the researcher took great care in selecting the data collection methods, it is essential to note the intentionality behind each choice. Coghlan (2019) advised that to have confidence in the worth, validity, and reliability of the data, researchers need to be very selective and intentional, even considering the following: who collected the data, when it was collected, what was collected, and why it was collected. This level of thoughtfulness and data saturation helped the researcher remain mindful of biases.

Subjectivity Statement

Coghlan (2019) defined insider action research as “conducting action research in the organization or community in which one is employed or is a member” (p. 191). He also advised that as an insider action researcher, it is essential to manage the politics of the situation (Coghlan, 2019). The researcher led the action research implementation and design teams in this study. Additionally, the researcher was the sole facilitator who designed and taught the professional development. As the principal and instructional leader of the school where the research took place, the researcher was responsible for leading professional development.

This study was a part of a staff choice session. Staff members were given descriptions of the courses, but the facilitator was not announced until after the staff had enrolled in the course. Staff members were privy to the course topic, as the principal had previously facilitated a few introductory sessions on culturally responsive practices. Staff members could choose technology, literacy, gifted, or culturally responsive practices. Eight staff members signed up for the course. All staff members completed a cultural competence survey at the start of the year. This survey was given to the study participants at the end of the professional development series.

Before this series, the researcher facilitated four book studies using the exact text. The researcher also designed a professional development series on culturally responsive teaching and the brain for a different school district. The researcher wanted to teach educators about a topic not discussed in a culturally diverse district with significant academic achievement gaps. The initial book studies did not include a systematic process for implementing strategies gleaned from the book. However, it was more focused on reading and reflecting, where theory was the focus over practice. This study is the first time the researcher used a problem of practice, data collection, and intentional implementation. The researcher was careful to use multiple methods of data collection and analysis to identify themes and patterns that were not influenced by the background knowledge of the researcher.

This next section acknowledges and addresses the limitations of the study.

Limitations

One fundamental limitation of this study is the role of the researcher. Throughout the series, the researcher employed reflexivity, examining one's own beliefs and judgments, and a facilitator approach so that, as much as possible, the participants saw the researcher as the

facilitator, not the principal. The researcher also served as a member and observer of the design team. With overlapping roles, the researcher influenced the study to a certain degree.

Additionally, although 48 staff members had the option of choice sessions, only eight signed up for the class and agreed to participate. This participant size reflects a tiny percentage of the school. However, the participants represented multiple departments, grade levels, and leadership influences.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the data collection and data analysis methods for this action research study. Because of its cyclical nature, action research uses a qualitative method. A team of educators participated in a semester-long professional development series on culturally responsive teaching practices. The researcher used reflective questionnaires, focus groups, documents, and researcher reflections as data sources. The researcher's reflections were predominantly used to understand the perspectives of the students on the impact of implementing the strategies. The focus group refined and steered the direction of professional development. The documents identified student impact and themes across various grade levels. The researcher's journal was used to log the ongoing observations made in the professional development. The researcher coded and triangulated all data to lift themes and patterns from the professional development series.

The next chapter of the dissertation presents the findings from the study. The sections describe the study in detail, including more information on the interventions, cycles, design, and implementation.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Across the United States, educators continue to focus educational efforts on closing the achievement gap. According to some researchers, the achievement gap is a racialized and negative term that implies deficit thinking (Shukla et al., 2022). The researcher does not discount systemic structures that provide inequitable learning experiences. However, for clarity, this study will use the more recognizable term, achievement gap, which is defined as a disparity or a significant unfair academic performance between white and minoritized students. This research specifically focuses on the achievement gap in race between White and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students. Gunaratnam (2003) coined the term “minoritized,” and used it instead of “minority” because there can be a perceived negative connotation when using “minority.” The term minor implies less than, but because BIPOC groups have been intentionally targeted, disenfranchised, and overpowered to have a less than status, they are minoritized, not a minority.

A United States initiative enacted in 2001 to combat the gap between white and minoritized students was No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The current national educational reform policy is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015). Gloria Ladson Billings, an educational scholar, extensively researched academically successful teachers with African American students, making strides to reduce the achievement gap. She shared that as she looked and listened, studying teacher practices with a qualitative lens, she could develop a grounded theory

of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Like Billings, this action research includes a portion for the participants to look, listen, and study.

The researcher in this study analyzed the perspectives of teachers as they participated in a three-month professional development (PD) course about culturally responsive teaching practices. The researcher chose qualitative research as the action research method because the crux of this research centered on teacher reflections through questionnaires. Qualitative research aims to understand how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of the meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The majority of the reviewed research included qualitative methods. Although the study cannot directly tie teacher implementation to student change, the ARDT analyzed teacher reflections to determine their perspectives on a perceived student impact and changes they noticed in their practices.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of elementary school teachers as they learned and implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms, specifically in reading and math. This study investigated the perspectives of the leader facilitating professional learning and observing the implementation of culturally responsive teaching, the implications of underperforming subgroups of students, and the impact of professional learning on the student achievement gap.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?

2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?

Chapter 4 provides a narrated analysis of the findings. The context of the study is detailed to reveal significant discrepancies in academic achievement among racial subgroups. The chapter revisits the action research design and the contributions of the ARDT and the ARIT.

Context of the Study

Washington Public Schools (WPS) is a diverse urban school in the heart of a major city in the southeastern part of the United States. In July 2020, WPS created a 5-year strategic plan to address reading and numeracy proficiency, the graduation rate/post-graduation preparedness, and career and college readiness. In 2022, 31% of grades 3-8 students read at grade level. Of that, 31%, 80% of White students were reading at grade level, 33% of Hispanic students were reading at grade level, and 17% of Black students were reading at grade level. In 2022, the WPS had a student population comprising 70% Black students, 16% White students, and 8% Hispanic students. 62% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged. To address the results, the leading language for each goal emphasized closing the achievement gaps with a focus on equity.

From 2022 to 2024, WPS had three different superintendents leading the school district. Despite this, the strategic plan has remained a clear goal. Two years before the study, there were slight changes in the data, but on average, the achievement results in WPS remained the same.

By 2024, the reading proficiency levels in grades 3-8 increased by 4%, with the gap widening between White, Hispanic, and Black students by an average of 2%.

This research took place on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic and the civil uprising that occurred after the murder of George Floyd. Across the United States, many equity issues, such as resource variability, police brutality, and racial inequities, resurfaced and took center stage. The United States government, national businesses, and school systems responded to the cries of a request for change and equity. In response to the request, WPS created an Equity Department. One of the foci is academic achievement gaps, so the Office of Equity partnered with a third-party organization to research what happens in elementary schools when the principal has a professional development focus on culturally responsive practices. Three elementary schools were chosen; Boston Academy (BA) was one of them.

The three-year partnership started with principal coaching during year one and, halfway through the year, shifted the focus to monthly professional development training with all three school equity leadership teams on the tenets of culturally responsive practices: cultural awareness, academic achievement, and social justice. Year two continued monthly professional development, focusing on auditing equity at each school. Year three focused on implementing school-wide professional development on culturally responsive practices. The district was interested in seeing if implementing culturally responsive practices could make a difference in schools in an underperforming district.

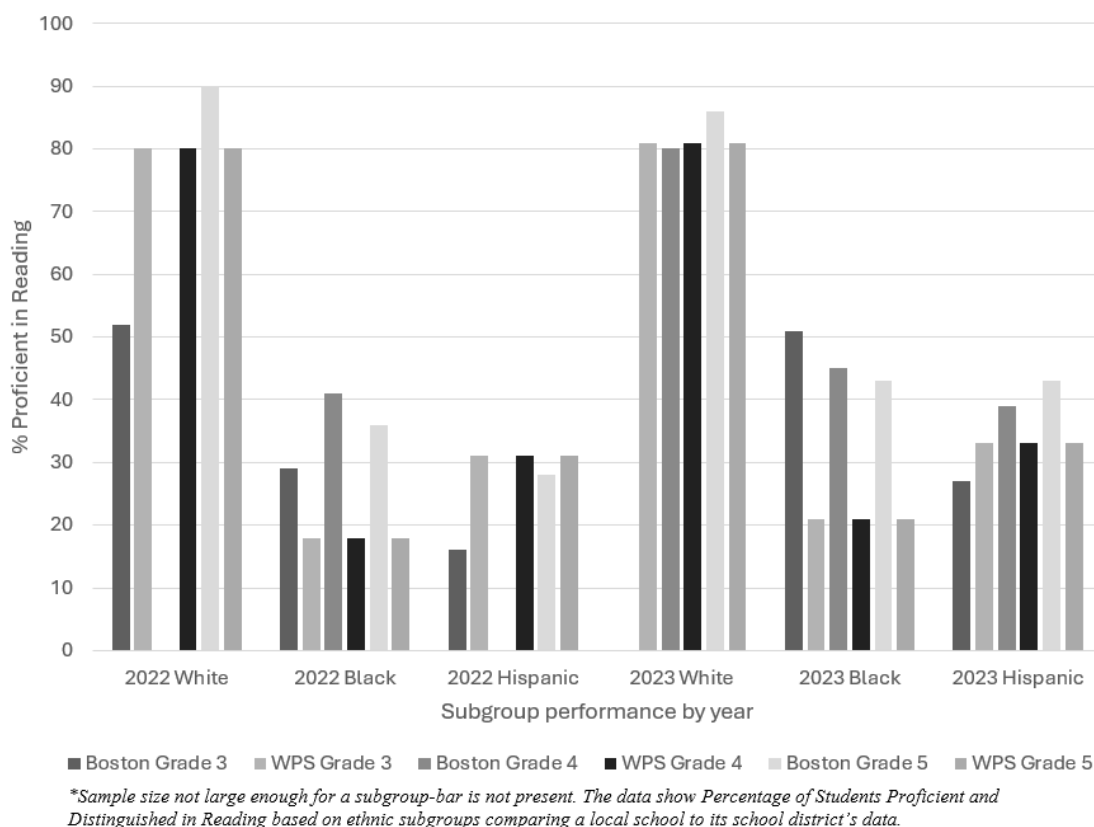
Problem Framing Based on the Site

During the study, Boston Academy (BA) was an urban elementary school in WPS. The school was diverse, and similarly to WPS, it had wide achievement gaps in reading amongst students in varying racial groups. Although BA showed movement in closing the achievement

gap at the local school level in Spring 2022 and Spring 2023, the differences in reading proficiency at the school and district levels raised concerns. Figure 4.1 shows the achievement gap by race in Reading in Spring 2022 and Spring 2023.

Figure 4.1

Spring 2022-2023 Percentage of Students Proficient and Distinguished in ELA Based on Ethnicity



The researcher analyzed the perspectives of teachers as they participated in a three-month professional development course centered on culturally responsive teaching practices. Using various data, including Figure 4.1, the ARDT developed a professional development series on the perspectives of teachers and leaders who learned and implemented culturally responsive practices in the educational setting. Because the crux of this research centered on the reflections

of teachers through questionnaires, qualitative research was chosen as the action research method.

The Story and Outcomes

The qualitative action research study included a design team and an implementation team. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) comprised the principal, who also serves as the primary researcher, two instructional coaches, two teachers, and one counselor at BA. In the 2023-2024 school year, BA was led by a principal (the primary researcher) with an instructional technology specialist degree. She was seeking her doctoral degree, holding one year of experience as the principal and seven years of additional experience as an assistant principal in a neighboring district. She had ten years of elementary classroom experience, one year as a content instructional coach, and one year as an instructional technology coach.

The two instructional coaches were in their first year in those roles, having previously worked for several years in the classroom at BA. Additionally, two teachers and one counselor were part of the BA instructional leadership team (ILT). One teacher had four years of classroom experience. The second teacher had three years of classroom experience. The counselor had served in his role for the past 9 years, with 11 years of teaching experience. He was a founding staff member of the school, and all 20 years of his experience were spent at BA.

The primary focus of the ARDT was to create a professional learning community (PLC) and provide interventions to improve student achievement in reading by focusing on learning culturally responsive teaching practices within a PLC. In December 2023, the lead researcher started the design and discussion of the research study after obtaining consent. Throughout the action research process, the ARDT played a crucial role in designing professional development

to improve the teaching practice for minoritized students, who have historically underperformed, by focusing on strategies to engage students and enhance their academic success.

Action Research Design Team

Qualitative research aims to understand how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of the meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The ARDT was essential to this study. The researcher selected the team based on their BA Equity Leadership Team participation. The Equity Leadership Team was another focus group at BA that partnered with three other WPS schools and a leadership academy based out of New York. That group aimed to learn about educational equity, focusing on culturally and linguistically responsive practices.

Table 4.1 displays additional information about the ARDT participants.

Table 4.1

Action Research Design Team

Team Member	Primary Role at Boston Academy	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Principal	Led and conducted all research with the action research design team for the purpose of data analysis. Brought 10 years of previous coaching experience to the team.
Allie Adara	5 th Grade Teacher	Provided a teacher lens for intermediate learners.
Bria Gifford	Kindergarten Teacher	Provided a teacher lens for primary learners.
Sal Whitford	Instructional Coach	Provided context and historical understanding of the progression of culture and gentrification as a founding school member.

Team Member	Primary Role at Boston Academy	Action Research Role
Dan Stuart	School Counselor	Provided experience in social-emotional learning and impact on adolescent students dealing with vulnerable topics.
Helena Ramirez	Dual Language Immersion Instructional Coach	Provided experiences from Latinx and Hispanic culture working with ESOL students. Brought 5 years of experience as a Bilingual Literacy teacher for 5 years. Note taker for ARDT meetings.

Throughout the four-month study, the ARDT met four times. During the first meeting, the team designed the study. After each cycle, the ARDT met to discuss the progress and make any necessary changes to implement during the next cycle. The final meeting was to hear the summary of the study and the results from the data collection and to make suggestions for future practice based on the findings from the study. The ARDT reviewed results from questionnaires, researcher observation notes, and focus group data to plan and implement interventions for the ARIT. The iterative and reflective study enabled the ARDT to continuously assess the PLC's learning objectives to make sure that the strategy-based content catered to the needs of the professional development (PD) participants.

Action Research Implementation Team

The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) comprised participants who registered for the 2023-2024 BA staff professional development (PD) series. Based on board policy, all staff could be required to remain after school for an additional hour, two days per week, for planning and meeting times if selected by the principal. At BA, staff were required to stay one day per week for an extra hour after school. One of the options for late days was to participate in staff-led PD. Before the series started, school leaders invited staff members to sign

up as instructors for interesting topics they wanted to teach their colleagues. Three staff members volunteered to lead a PD class in addition to the principal, who would facilitate a session on culturally responsive practices.

In late Fall 2023, a registration link was sent to all certified staff to sign up for a course. Four courses were offered: Reading Strategies, Creative Thinking Strategies, Canva/TikTok Technology Strategies, and Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies. The registration did not list the facilitators on the registration link. Certified staff members were divided among the four sessions based on their selections. Of the 56 registrants, eight teachers signed up for the Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies session. Based on the content and design of the class, the researcher decided it would be beneficial for participants to volunteer for the course based on interest and not be assigned.

During the first session, participants were given an overview of the class and an opportunity to participate in the study. All eight participants agreed to participate in the study as ARIT members. The participants held various roles, including classroom teachers, support teachers, special area teachers, and administrators. Three of the eight ARIT members were also on the ARDT. The other five ARIT members were three support teachers: an MTSS support specialist, an ESOL teacher, an Art teacher, and two classroom teachers, one fourth-grade teacher and one fifth-grade teacher. Table 4.2 displays the participants on the ARIT.

Table 4.2

Action Research Implementation Team

Culturally Responsive Professional Development Participant	Grade Level/Department	Teaching Experience
Aditi Abdul	Behavior Coach	10 - 19 years
Allie Adara	5 th Grade Teacher	20+ years

Culturally Responsive Professional Development Participant	Grade Level/Department	Teaching Experience
Bria Gifford	Kindergarten Teacher	4 - 9 years
Aleta Gonzalez	4 th Grade Teacher (DLI Spanish)	0 - 3 years
Angela Perez	5 th Grade Teacher (DLI Spanish)	4 - 9 years
Helena Ramirez	Dual Language Immersion Instructional Coach	10 - 19 years
Samantha Service	Art Teacher	4 - 9 years
Evan Wade	ESOL	10 - 19 years

Initial Design Team Meeting

On December 13, 2023, the ARDT met in person for the initial planning meeting. The team met in the front conference room of Boston Academy. The principal/primary researcher facilitated the meeting. The researcher began with introductions. All six ARDT members were in attendance. After the introductions, the researcher went over the agenda. The objectives of the meeting were introductions, a review of the study's purpose, the theoretical framework, the logic model, the research questions, and meeting timelines. After the introduction, the researcher asked for consent from the members to participate in the study. All members agreed and signed.

During the initial ARDT meeting in December 2023, members created a suggested path for the ARIT. The suggested plan was based on three different interventions: professional development, implementing culturally responsive teaching practices, and using reflective journals and focus groups to refine their implementation. Table 4.3 shows the timeline of the action research.

Table 4.3*Action Research Timeline*

Action	Audience	Materials	Date Completed
Cycle I ARDT Initial Planning Meeting	ARDT	Theoretical Framework; Logic Model; Research- based Interventions; Prequestionnaire Data	December 12, 2023
Cycle I ARIT Professional Development	ARIT	Agendas; PLC Protocols; Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain Resource	January 6, 2024
Cycle I ARIT Professional Development	ARIT	Agendas; PLC Protocols; Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain Resource	January 30, 2024
Cycle II ARDT Planning Meeting	ARDT	Theoretical Framework; Logic Model; Research- based Interventions; Cycle I Researcher Notes	January 31, 2024
Cycle II ARIT Professional Development	ARIT	Agendas; PLC Protocols; Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain Resource; 7 Steps to a Language- Rich, Interactive Classroom Resource	March 5, 2024
Cycle II ARIT Professional Development	ARIT	Agendas; PLC Protocols; Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain Resource; 7 Steps to a Language- Rich, Interactive Classroom Resource	March 19, 2024

Action	Audience	Materials	Date Completed
Focus Group Meeting	ARIT	Focus Group Interview Protocol	March 19, 2024
Cycle III ARDT Planning Meeting	ARDT	Theoretical Framework; Logic Model; Research-based Interventions; Cycle II Questionnaire Data, Focus Group Data	March 26, 2024
Cycle III ARIT Professional Development	ARIT	Agendas; PLC Protocols; Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain Resource	April 9, 2024
Cycle III ARIT Professional Development	ARIT	Agendas; PLC Protocols; Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain Resource	April 23, 2024
Closing Focus Group Meeting	ARIT	Focus Group Interview Protocol	April 23, 2024
Cycle III ARDT Post Planning Meeting	ARDT	Theoretical Framework; Logic Model; Research-based Interventions; Cycle III Questionnaire Data, Closing Focus Group Data	April 30, 2024

After reviewing the image of the theoretical framework and logic model, the researcher passed out the pre-questionnaire that the staff completed. The researcher reviewed the questions from each component of the questionnaire. The team reviewed the self-assessment responses from the participants in each grade level who completed the questionnaire during a school-wide professional development session. Each ARDT member, including the researcher, received the responses from one grade level.

The questions on the self-assessment were divided into four domains: Recognizing the Educational Impact of Cultural Diversity; Addressing Demographic Inequities in Achievement; Building Relationships across Cultural Differences; and Adapting Curriculum to Reflect Cultural Diversity. Each domain had between 5 and 9 questions. Teachers assessed themselves from a beginning range of competency to an exemplary level. The team used chart paper to script out words and phrases that emerged as they analyzed the various question responses in the domains. The domain that had the most opportunity for growth across the grade levels was Building Relationships across Cultural Differences. Based on their analysis, the ARDT determined that cultural awareness should be the first topic for Cycle 1.

The ARDT used what they gleaned from the questionnaire to develop the interventions for the ARIT. Together, they organized the words and phrases recorded on chart paper into three prioritized areas: professional growth, equity and social justice, and cultural understanding and collaboration. The plan included professional learning that focused on implementing culturally responsive practices. Table 4.4 depicts the ARIT schedule designed by the ARDT.

Table 4.4

Action Research Cycle I Meetings

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
January 6, 2024	ARIT 1.1	PD: 1.1 Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching
January 30, 2024	ARIT 1.2	PD: 1.2 Understanding Yourself to Understand Others
January 31, 2024	ARDT 1.3	Planning for PLC ARIT 2.1

Action Research Cycle I

Cycle 1 coincided with a PD series for the entire school. PD was also identified as an intervention in the action research. Cycle I was a two-week cycle. This included two PD sessions about cultural awareness and an ARDT post planning meeting to plan for Cycle 2. Before Cycle 1 began, each certified educator at BA signed up for a PD session of their choice. The first two sessions in Cycle 1 took place on January 6, 2024, and January 30, 2024. The learning objectives on January 6, 2024, were:

- Defining Culturally Responsive Teaching
- Distinctions of Equity
- Ready for Rigor Framework
- Self-Examination: Making the familiar Strange
- Identify Your Cultural Reference Points

Before the first ARIT meeting, the researcher sent a welcome email to the participants, desiring to set an upbeat tone for the after-school PD. The first ARIT meeting occurred on January 6, 2024, with all eight participants attending the session. When participants arrived at the session, an educational quote was displayed on the board, and instrumental music played in the background. As an attention-getter, the principal, researcher, and facilitator began the session by reading the quote aloud. Following the opening quote was an introduction to the class and an agenda review. To create psychological safety, shared agreements (norms) were provided to the participants.

The facilitator asked participants to jot down what they hoped to get from the sessions in their notebooks. The participants were given two minutes to write down their goals. Then, the facilitator asked each participant to share their desired outcome. The facilitator then shared the

WPS subgroup reading data based on race and revisited the purpose of the class. The researcher explained that not only was this a PD class, but it was also an action research study. The facilitator let participants know they were also invited to participate in the research, but it was not mandatory. Eagerly, all participants agreed to participate in the class as the ARIT.

The researcher moved on to the next part of the session, which was creating shared meanings around the common vocabulary to be discussed. First, the researcher split the group into two groups of three and one group of two. The researcher passed out chart paper and markers. Participants were asked to draw a visual representation of how they defined Culturally Responsive Teaching. Participants were given 5 minutes to draw. Once the time was up, the participants rotated around the room to view each chart paper. The researcher observed that each chart paper had a globe drawn in its definition. The researcher then provided three definitions: Equity, defined by the National Equity Project; Inequity by Design, and Culturally Responsive Teaching, defined by Hammond.

The next part of the professional development analyzed a chart called Distinctions of Equity, which cleared up misconceptions of three terms that should not be used interchangeably: multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, and social justice. The facilitator pointed out that culturally responsive teaching is the focus of the class and the only term that specifically addresses academic achievement. To close out the lecture part of the session, the facilitator presented the Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching to the group, pointing out that the first part of the framework, Awareness, would be the focus for the first two sessions. The participants read over the seven Ready for Rigor Framework awareness indicators.

The researcher then provided the participants with a poem from Khalil Gibran entitled “On Children”. The facilitator wanted the participants to connect personally in the first class to

their upbringing. Poetry was used as an impersonal way to reflect. Each participant was given a poem on parenting. They were first asked if they agreed or disagreed with the poet. They were then asked to jot down what they thought of the poem. They were then asked to reflect on what the person who raised them would think of the poem. The facilitator closed the class by allowing the participants to share their chosen answers with the class. Participants were given a final question to think about how their culture impacts how they feel about the poem, their self-awareness, and how their culture impacts how they interact with children and their colleagues in the school building.

The researcher observed high engagement when discussing how the participants were raised. The facilitator ran out of time and reached the end of the one-hour session. The facilitator closed with the reading that was expected to be completed before the next class and two optional questions to answer during the break between the following class:

1. Think about Kahlil Gibran's poem. Compare and contrast your teaching style to the parenting style he describes.
2. In what areas of your practice with students, colleagues, and/or parents do you need to take the emotional risk and re-examine the deeply held beliefs that influence your responses and interactions?

The ARIT met for the second time on January 30, 2024. All participants attended. Participants entered the room, and a quote was displayed on the screen with instrumental music playing. The facilitator began the session by reading the quote aloud and moving into the title of the next session. The facilitator reviewed the objections from Session 1 and the objectives for Session 2, finishing with sharing the shared agreements for the session.

The learning objectives for January 30, 2024, were:

- Discussing personal cultural frames
- Widen Your Interpretation Aperture
- Identify Your Triggers
- Practice Self-Management
- Intro to Information Processing

The facilitator decided to warm up with an image of the inside of the brain, asking participants what the highlighted part of the brain was. One participant stumbled over the term, and the facilitator supported her by articulating the term, Amygdala. The facilitator went on to explain the term amygdala hijack, which happens when people feel threatened. The facilitator let the participants know that during the session, they would dive deeper into cultural awareness of self by identifying cultural triggers. The facilitator pointed out that this type of learning could cause an amygdala hijack.

In the next part of the session, the participants read directly about the importance of a lens on the camera and how you can see more through the lens when you widen the aperture. The facilitator pointed out that this open-mindedness can be helpful in the classroom when teaching a diverse group of students, especially marginalized students. The facilitator explained how failing to do this could result in students experiencing an amygdala hijack. This was important to the facilitator to point out because when the amygdala is hijacked, learning cannot occur until the learner returns to a state of calmness. Session 2 was reading heavy and continued with participants reading about cultural frames and then participating in a group discussion about the text on cultural frames.

Through the reading, the researcher, who served as the facilitator, identified a protocol called S.O.D.A. for how to respect the culture of students without using their culture as the

standard. In "Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain" by Z. Hammond, "SODA" stands for "Stop, Observe, Detach, Awaken" - a strategy for teachers to manage their own emotions when triggered by a student's behavior, allowing them to respond more thoughtfully and culturally sensitively; essentially taking a moment to pause, analyze the situation without immediate judgment, shift focus away from personal triggers, and then re-engage with the student from a more empathetic perspective" (pg. 65).

The final reading asked participants to reflect on whether they wanted a SODA, which was a figurative reference. The facilitator closed with an activity to help participants identify cultural triggers, reflecting on the following prompt:

1. Identify two social interaction elements that activate threats in the brain.

After the class concluded, the researcher observed that the students were less engaged when discussing cultural triggers. The researcher wondered if it was too soon to discuss sensitive matters. Additionally, the researcher highlighted several facilitator leader actions that were particularly noteworthy during the second professional learning session and were improvements from session one, such as sticking to the schedule, cutting down on the content, focusing on quality versus quantity, and following the same teaching framework that teachers were expected to follow during their instructional lessons.

The researcher met with the ARDT briefly on January 31, 2024, to discuss the first cycle observations, the content of the course, and feedback from the participants. Participants completed a feedback survey after the first session for the BA professional learning liaison. The researcher shared those findings and the researcher's observations with the ARDT. The biggest takeaway for the ARDT was to tweak the sessions so the participants did not feel overwhelmed and would engage more in class. The following are adjustments that were made:

- Participants had the option of completing their reflections after the session breaks or as the “Do Now” opening when they arrived for the session.
- The participants also gave feedback on what they wanted to learn in the subsequent sessions.
- The PD session would follow the same instructional framework that teachers are expected to follow, which was four parts: Warm Up, Mini Lesson, Work Session, and Closing
- Each session would focus on practices that could be implemented.

Moving into Cycle 2, the ARDT developed a process to complete at the end of each Cycle 2 session, where the researcher would provide the ARIT with a reflection questionnaire to complete. In Cycle 2, the ARDT implemented the subsequent intervention focused on implementing culturally responsive practices in the classroom. The team asked participants to implement one of the culturally responsive practices discussed during the PD session and then complete the reflective questionnaire. The reflective questionnaire for each Cycle 2 session had three questions:

1. What technique did you implement?
2. How did your audience receive it?
3. What is your reflection on the implementation? How did the technique improve or impact your practice?

Action Research Cycle II

The third professional learning session in the Culturally Responsive Teaching PD marked the beginning of Cycle 2. This cycle began with an ARDT meeting in the front conference room on January 31, 2024. Three of five ARDT members could stay after school for the meeting. First,

the researcher briefly reviewed the slide deck from the first two PD sessions, displaying the slide deck on the screen. In the second part of the meeting, the researcher specifically shared observation notes with the ARDT. The researcher noted a difference in engagement when the topic changed from cultural memories to cultural triggers. The researcher observed fewer hand raising, smiling expressions, and more muted tones when discussing cultural triggers.

The researcher continued to read observation notes written in their journal. The researcher highlighted that as a facilitator, she felt rushed while teaching the PD and was afraid that running out of time was an obstacle to having a well-paced session. The researcher shared with the ARDT that participants could give feedback on what they wanted to learn next. The ARIT indicated that they wanted to move on to learning about information processing in culturally responsive practices. As a final reflection and note, the researcher shared that she wanted more engagement and participation from the ARIT during Cycle 2 and less lecture time from the facilitator.

After listening to the updates from the researcher, the floor was opened for feedback. Mr. Whitford, Ms. Ramirez, and Ms. Gifford each shared their reflections verbally as they went around the table. Based on the information from both the researcher and points brought out in the discussion, the ARDT suggested that the ARIT move on to learning about Culturally Responsive Practices and Building Intellectual Capacity. In addition, the ARDT requested that the facilitator use the BA 4-part instructional framework to address the timing and participation concerns. Additionally, they suggested that the facilitator model strategies identified in the reading be discussed during the session with the participants. They requested that the subsequent two professional development Cycle 2 sessions include job-embedded practice for the participants, which was the Cycle 2 intervention. The ARDT mapped out the Cycle 2 sessions. The sessions

would be unable to continue in February due to parent conferences, winter breaks, and a nighttime school event. Cycle 2 restarted in March 2024, four weeks after that ARDT meeting.

Table 4.5 provides a visual outline for Cycle 2.

Table 4.5

Action Research Cycle II Meetings

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
March 5, 2024	ARIT 2.1	PD: 2.1 Building Intellectual Capacity
March 19, 2024	ARIT 2.2	PD: 2.2 Building Intellectual Capacity & Focus Group
March 26, 2024	ARDT 2.3	Planning for PLC ARIT 3.1

Cycle 2 PD sessions occurred on March 5, 2024, and March 19, 2024. The learning outcomes for the March 5, 2024, session were:

- Analyzing the Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching: Information Processing
- Four ways to structure the lesson to aid Information Processing
 - Ignite; Chunk; Chew; Review
- 7 Steps to a Language-Rich Interactive Classroom
 - QSSSA (Question, Signal, Stem, Share, and Assess)

The learning outcomes for the March 19, 2024, session were:

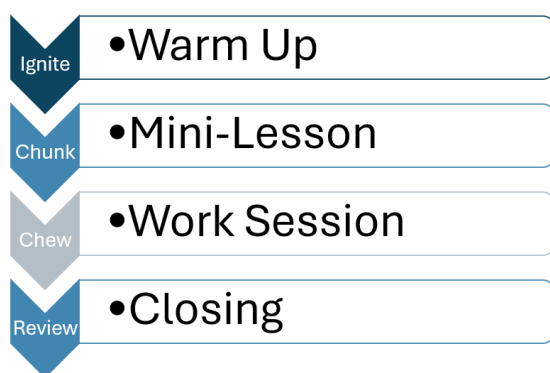
- Provide appropriate challenge to stimulate brain growth to increase intellectual capacity
- Help students process new content using methods from oral traditions
- Provide students with authentic opportunities to process content

- Use formative assessments and feedback to increase intellectual capacity

For the third PD session on March 5th, 2024, the primary researcher/facilitator had identified how the four components of information processing, which aligned with a culturally responsive practice and the structure of how the brain learns, followed the same pattern as Boston Academy's 4-part instructional framework. The facilitator taught the remaining sessions using this aligned framework based on neuroscience principles. Figure 4.2 shows the instructional framework the researcher used, where the four components of information processing paralleled the 4-part instructional framework at Boston Academy.

Figure 4.2

Instructional Framework



Note: Adapted from State Department of Education (2023) and Hammond (2015).

The PD session on March 5, 2025, opened with the facilitator capturing the attention of the participants with an engaging introduction (Ignite/Warm Up). In session 3, the facilitator used provocation through pictures as the warm-up. Participants analyzed a picture of people in line for free soup and compared the picture from the great depression to the current economy. Next, the facilitator sorted the content while modeling the teaching strategy (Chunk/Mini Lesson). The facilitator asked, “How is the Great Depression relevant in today’s society?” On half of the slide displayed for the ARIT was the question that included a teaching tip that the

teacher could ask a question at the start of the mini-lesson or after explicit instruction of the content.

The facilitator then shared that teachers could use a dialogic talk strategy that was culturally and linguistically responsive to promote information processing by using QSSSA (Question, Signal, Stem, Share, Assess). The facilitator explained that when teachers use QSSSA, they first ask an open-ended question. They then instruct students to use an identified signal when they are ready to answer, like putting their pencil down or raising a thumb. The teacher should then provide a sentence stem for students to use when responding.

Lastly, teachers could assess students using equity sticks to randomly call on students to share their answers. The facilitator then had the ARIT participate with QSSSA to answer a similar question about the great depression. The facilitator displayed a slide with the characteristics of an economic depression with the question, “How are the characteristics of a depression similar and/or different to today’s time?” To support the learning, the facilitator displayed a table explaining QSSSA on one side and the specific student expectations for how to participate in the discussion on the other side.

For the work session/chunk, the researcher had the ARIT members read about the four ways to structure lessons to aid information processing. The facilitator set a purpose for reading by instructing the ARIT to select a technique from the reading that they would implement in the next two weeks before the next class. The facilitator gave participants 15 minutes to read. While participants read, the facilitator read as well. The facilitator played instrumental music. Once the timer went off, the facilitator asked each participant to make a public commitment to the technique they would implement before the next class. Each participant shared their technique as the facilitator typed their response for the participants to see. The facilitator told participants that

they would receive a three-question reflective journal response via email to complete and email prior to the next PD session.

During session four on March 10, 2024, participants started with an opener reflecting on six tweets displayed on the screen. Ms. Service and Ms. Abdul were both absent. The facilitator was not aware before class that they would be absent. Following the class, Ms. Service shared that she had to update her driver's license, and Ms. Abdul was absent from school that day because she was sick.

After the warmup, the facilitator wanted to do a mid-check of how much the participants retained when asked to define culturally responsive teaching. Before the reading, participants were given a handout, a protocol called "Give One, Get One." Participants were given two minutes to write the definition of culturally responsive practices in the top box. They then participated in two movement rotations where they were given four minutes to share their definition (giving one) and then take only one new thing from their partner to add to their definition (get one). Partners then switched and repeated that process. Then, the participants returned to their seats. They had two minutes to refine and rewrite their definition in the bottom box to explain culturally responsive practices in their own words.

For the work session, the participants continued reading about information processing practices. They read for 10 minutes and then were asked to break up into partners, which forced one group of three. The participants brainstormed activities for each technique they read about for five minutes. When the timer went off, the facilitator reinforced the learning through a closing activity (review/closing) where the audience participated in a gallery walk and identified a strategy they would use next. This process aligned with how the brain naturally learns. It optimized the participants' attention, minimized cognitive overload, facilitated long-term

memory formation, and promoted active engagement, all key factors for effective learning in children (Brown et al., 2014).

The facilitator led a focus group to close out the session. The facilitator instructed the participants to bring their chairs to the middle of the room and create a semicircle. In front of them, the facilitator sat and asked the participants to reflect on their commitment to strategy implementation in the last class. Following this, the facilitator displayed the six focus group questions on the board:

- Explain the technique you implemented.
- How did you choose it and why?
- What were the students' reactions?
- What was your perspective on how the students responded?
- How do you think your technique ties into CRT?
- What needs to be tweaked for next time?

The facilitator recorded the answers of the participants in the researcher's journal. Of the seven ARIT members present, Mr. Ramirez and Ms. Gonzalez did not contribute to the discussion. Ms. Ramirez voluntarily shared that she did not get a chance to find a student group to work with, but she realized that she could implement her strategy while coaching a class. Ms. Gonzalez did not offer a reason for her nonresponse. Until then, only two of the eight participants had turned in their three-question reflective journals.

Action Research Cycle III

Cycle 3 took place in the late spring of 2024 over four weeks. The ARDT met during the week before spring break to discuss the progress of the PD sessions and the reflections from the questionnaires and to assess if the goals were being met. On March 26, 202, the facilitator

reviewed the slide decks from the previous PD and then showed a summary of the data collected from sessions 5 and 6. All participants were present in the conference room for the meeting. The facilitator did not use a formal talk structure or protocol to guide the discussion. Instead, team members spoke freely as they sat around the table.

The ARDT recommended that the facilitator continue with a flexible and engaging approach to PD. One area the ARDT wanted the facilitator to include in the discussions was a focus on defining high expectations and exploring the school-to-prison pipeline. This was lifted because the ARDT thought aligning the three tenets of culturally and linguistically responsive practices, which they had previously discussed at their most recent Equity Leadership Team training, was important. The ARDT discussed the final intervention and self-reflections. The goal for the final Cycle was to continue with PD as an intervention from Cycle 1 and implement the CRT practices in Cycle 2 while elevating the reflections of teacher practice and student impact in Cycle 3.

The facilitator was concerned about that being the primary intervention and suggested a tweak. As a result, she combined the focus group at the end of the PD session to ensure maximum attendance/participation. By the fifth session, Ms. Aldara was the only participant emailing her reflections before class. However, the ARDT suggested allowing participants to complete their reflections at the start of class. Ms. Gifford specifically stated that she needed that accommodation to balance the numerous expectations required of her from class, work, and her personal life.

Using the feedback from the ARDT and input from ARIT, the final cycle focused on learning partnerships and a community of learners. Table 4.6 outlines Cycle 3 of this study.

Table 4.6*Action Research Cycle III Meetings*

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
April 9, 2024	ARIT 3.1	PD: 3.1 Creating a Culturally Responsive Community for Learners
April 23, 2024	ARIT 3.2	PD: 3.2 Creating a Culturally Responsive Community for Learners
April 30, 2024	ARIT 3.3	Final Recommendations

The ARIT met for the final PD sessions of the series after the staff returned from spring break. Sessions 5 and 6 of Cycle 3 occurred on April 9, 2024, and April 23, 2024. The learning objectives for Session 5 were:

- Classroom Aesthetics
- Build classroom culture and learning around communal (sociocultural) talk and task structures
- Use classroom rituals and routines to support a culture of learning

The learning objectives for session 6 were:

- The Learning Pit
- 4 Horsemen of Deficit Thinking
- Connection between Learning Partnerships and Information Processing

The last two sessions followed the same 4-part framework. On April 9, 2024, session 5 began with a Chalk Talk as the warmup. Participants received pictures of classroom designs and were asked to reflect on how each class design made them feel. Participants read Chapter 8 from

Community of Learners and Learning Environment for the mini-lesson part of the session

(Hammond, 2015). The readers had to reflect on the questions on the slide deck:

1. What values do we want to communicate through our environment?
2. How do we want children to experience their time in our classroom?
3. What do the artifacts on the walls communicate to students, parents, or me about what is important?
4. What do we want the environment to “teach” those who are in it?

Participants shared their thinking with a partner. Reflecting as a school leader, the facilitator thought it was important during the work session of the penultimate PD that participants took the time to reflect on the overall learning and where culturally responsive practices were already evident in the school. In the following exercise of Session 5, participants completed their chart papers and took a gallery walk to see the different and common responses from their colleagues.

They responded to two prompts:

1. What culturally responsive practices are already present at Boston Academy?
2. Recreate the Ready for Rigor framework by filling in the practices that are already evident at school.

In contrast, session 6 began with a provocative video for participants to reflect on the school-to-prison pipeline and how those attitudes and practices that foster those types of environments show up in schools. The mini-lesson content included another video snippet of researcher Z. Hammond discussing the learning pit. The facilitator asked participants to analyze the image of the learning pit and how having high expectations for students and providing opportunities for productive struggle tie into the intellectual capacity needed for information processing.

Before moving into the work session, the facilitator warned of having low expectations as a teacher by showing a table of the Four Horsemen Deficits. For the work session, participants read about techniques to shift student mindsets to handle productive struggle better without giving up. The expectation for readers was to jot down four techniques shown in the figures. The ARIT participants then had to rank the techniques from their favorite to least favorite and tell why. These requirements were not really for which technique was better or worse. However, the facilitator wanted the participants to think critically about the components of each technique to internalize them more profoundly in a small amount of time by comparing the techniques.

After the work session, the final focus group and potluck lunch were held. Participants agreed before class to stay an additional 30 minutes for the final session. The participants in the focus group answered six questions:

1. How has this course impacted your cultural competence and proficiency?
2. Think about the strategies you're implemented thus far. Please provide one or more examples of how these strategies impacted student outcomes.
3. How did the design of this PD help you to become a culturally responsive educator?
4. What support from your facilitators helped you to implement your learning?
5. In your perception, is it beneficial for an educator to be culturally responsive? Explain why.
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

As participants enjoyed lunch, they called out answers during an open discussion. The facilitator typed up their reflections on the screen as participants answered. The facilitator told participants she wanted them to ensure she captured their final reflections accurately. The facilitator noted a moderate to fast pace of answers and participation from the ARIT. The

answers were positive. At the end of the session, the facilitator put up the chart paper from the first session on how participants drew nonverbal representations of the definition of culturally responsive teaching. The team did one final gallery walk. All participants were present except for Ms. Gifford. The facilitator noted that she wanted Ms. Gifford to be there. During the first session, Ms. Gifford said they probably would not see their pre-assessments at the end, but they did. Many participants laughed with each other as they compared their first understanding of the definition to their understanding months later.

On April 30, 2024, the researcher met with the ARDT for a final time. The team expressed their satisfaction with culturally responsive teaching and said that this area needs to be discussed more widely with educators. The final question they posed for the researcher was “what next?” Additionally, the team had questions about how the PD would build a community of educators beyond the participants committed to ongoing PD and implementing culturally responsive strategies. Each participant agreed that they felt the researcher needed to develop a plan to present the PD for the entire school as mandatory training.

Chapter Summary

This study examined the perspectives of elementary school teachers as they learned and implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. This qualitative action research study included a 3-Cycle PD session planned by the ARDT. Reflective questionnaires, researcher notes, focus groups, and student work samples from the professional development sessions were used to gather data for the study. The researcher documented all data field notes, transcripts, and reflective thoughts during the cycle.

The cycles concluded with a final wrap-up meeting with the ARDT, marking the end of this action research study. After all the meetings with the ARDT and PD sessions with the ARIT,

the researcher continued to generate initial codes and search for themes, leading to the overarching themes of the concluding findings. The process of coding and analyzing the data is described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Academic achievement is one of the most significant indicators for gauging student success and education (Ye et al., 2019). In the United States, this continues to be hard to evaluate for students of color because of inequities that lead to the academic achievement gap. School leaders are responsible for promoting and fostering educational experiences that prioritize the cultural and unique learning needs of multilingual, low-income, or students of color who have been historically marginalized (Gooden et al., 2023). Some school leaders do this by implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is a set of beliefs teachers have about themselves, the science of learning, students, and relationship building. These mindsets frame classroom experiences, improving student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, paving the way to improved student performance (Ladson-Billings, 2021). However, school leaders should not hold teachers accountable for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices unless teachers have explicit instruction through professional development (PD). PD is essential in improving the academic performance of underdeveloped and underachieving students of color (Gay, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of elementary school teachers as they learned and implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms, specifically in reading and math. This study investigated the perspectives of the leader facilitating professional learning and observing the implementation of culturally responsive

teaching, the implications of underperforming subgroups of students, and the impact of professional learning on the student achievement gap.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?

Chapter 5 describes the findings from the data, following the timeline of three research cycles. The cycles started in January 2024 and ended in April 2024. This chapter sheds light on what the action research design and implementation teams shared, considering a complete picture of the results. The study used several qualitative methods, including reflective questionnaires, notes in the researcher's journal while observing participants, and conducting focus groups. The emerging themes are identified in this chapter by comparing different data resources using triangulation. In Chapter 5, the researcher describes the analysis process and uses the findings to revisit the three action research questions of this study.

Overview of Key Findings and Themes

Chapter 5 situates the findings presented in Chapter 4 by analyzing the qualitative methods identified in previous chapters. The analysis process used to identify the themes and findings will be examined in greater detail in subsequent sections. Below is an overview of the five key findings of this study:

1. Professional development focused on culturally responsive teaching practices can have a positive impact on students, teachers, and leaders in urban elementary schools.
2. Specific teaching strategies, like dialogic talk activities and provocation visuals, can enhance student engagement and participation.
3. School leaders play an important role in fostering a supportive learning environment by modeling culturally responsive strategies and offering ongoing support to teachers.
4. Teachers should continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their culturally responsive strategies and make necessary adjustments based on student feedback and classroom observations.
5. Teachers must be aware that students might initially be hesitant to engage in new activities and that time constraints may impact the implementation of some strategies.

Additionally, after ongoing review and analysis of the findings concerning the research questions, the researcher identified three overarching themes:

1. Responsive Environments
2. Facilitative Leadership
3. Systemic Integration

This chapter analyzes the process used to identify the themes and describes each theme.

Introduction to Analysis

This action research case study examined how PD, designed to close the achievement gap by implementing culturally responsive teaching practices (CRTP), impacted school leaders and teachers at Boston Academy (BA). Educators at one urban school were allowed to sign up for PD on various topics. One class focused on increasing teachers' understanding of CRTP. Eight educators—half classroom teachers and half classroom support staff—signed up for the CRTP class and consented to participate in the action research tied to the class. Among the four classroom teachers, one had twenty-five years of experience, two had four years, and one was in their first year of teaching. The four support teachers had five to ten years of experience. The support teachers held the following roles: instructional coach, art teacher, ESOL teacher, and behavior specialist.

The eight class participants engaged in learning, implementing, and reflecting. In this action research, they are called the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). The researcher took on dual roles as researcher and facilitator, and it should be noted that the researcher was also the school principal. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) included the lead researcher, two instructional coaches, the school counselor, and two teachers. The lead researcher selected questionnaires and focus groups as primary data collection methods to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of the ARDT and ARIT.

In December 2024, the ARDT gathered to talk about data from a school-wide PD on responsive teaching practices and the plan to launch an action research team at BA. The PD cycles they planned ran from January 2024 to April 2024. They first aimed to meet every two weeks, but school calendar changes led to longer intervals between some meetings, resulting in no meetings occurring in February 2024. The ARDT came together before each ARIT cycle to

assess the progress and make any necessary changes for the next implementation cycle. At the end of all three cycles, the ARDT held a culminating meeting to discuss the research findings and implications for the school. The ARDT met five times in total.

The ARIT met twice per cycle for professional development. After Cycles 2 and 3, the researcher conducted focus groups with the ARIT. The focus groups occurred immediately following the PD to avoid asking participants to commit additional time. In total, the ARIT participated in six PD sessions. The study revealed several key findings. The results indicated that culturally responsive teaching practices PD impacted school administrators and teachers at an urban elementary school. The following sections discuss the outcomes of the action research process.

Key Themes and Findings

Bloomberg (2023) pointed out that although there are various methods for conducting qualitative analysis, they all share a common goal: to extract the underlying patterns, themes, or essence from the data. The researcher identified key findings using a coding process with responses from pre-questionnaires, focus groups, reflective questionnaires completed after each bi-weekly ARIT professional development session, researcher's journal notes, and transcriptions of monthly ARDT meetings. Using the data collected from the ARDT and ARIT, the researcher systematically analyzed the data.

For this action research study, data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify emerging themes and deduce findings. Delve was used to code the data, and the codes were revisited between cycles as a cyclical act (Saldana, 2021).

After each cycle, the researcher identified several codes and categorized them based on similarities that were mentioned more frequently. Using those prominent keywords and phrases

and rereading participant responses, themes emerged. Following the process described by Glanz (2014), the researcher used relevant keywords and phrases and generated themes. The ARDT vetted the finalized themes and confirmed with the researcher's journal notes. They were then compared to the literature and research questions to ensure they were relevant and cohesive. Table 5.1 below summarizes the themes derived from the data and how they relate to the research questions.

Table 5.1

Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
RQ1: How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?	• Culturally Responsive Teaching • Cultural Competence & Awareness • Teacher & Student Relationships • Supportive Learning Environments	Theme 1 – Responsive Environment
RQ2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?	• Learning Leaders Create Learning Cultures • Culturally Responsive Teaching,	Theme 2 – Facilitative Leadership
RQ3: How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?	• Learning Processes & Practices • Culturally Relevant Pedagogy • Supportive Learning	Theme 3 – Systemic Integration

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
	Environments	
	• Social Justice	

Lastly, the researcher consolidated the coded data and themes to highlight the research findings. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that findings are the insights an investigator gains from action research. However, these findings should also make a meaningful contribution to the broader organization or industry. The findings and correlating themes are further explained within the context of the research questions. Table 5.2 shows how the findings were sorted with the applicable research questions.

Table 5.2

Summary of Findings Connected to Research Questions

Research Questions	Findings
RQ1: How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?	• Finding 2: Specific teaching strategies, like dialogic talk activities and provocation visuals, can enhance student engagement and participation. • Finding 4: Teachers should continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their culturally responsive strategies and make necessary adjustments based on student feedback and classroom observations
RQ2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?	• Finding 3: School leaders play an important role in fostering a supportive learning environment by modeling culturally responsive strategies and offering ongoing support to teachers.

Research Questions	Findings
RQ3: How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?	• Finding 1: Professional development focused on culturally responsive teaching practices can have a positive impact on students, teachers, and leaders in urban elementary schools. • Finding 5: Teachers must be aware that students might initially be hesitant to engage in new activities and that time constraints may impact the implementation of some strategies.

Research Question 1

The primary intervention in this research study consisted of a school-based professional development series geared towards job-embedded culturally responsive teaching practices at BA. Research question one aimed to understand the impact of learning environments following PD focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching. The logic model for this study was an iterative process made up of four components adapted from Deming (1993) and Safir and Dugan (2021). The PD structure provided the space for participants to self-reflect, explore, and learn, and then integrate their new perspective into their educational settings. The design of each cycle and the intervention selected by the ARDT followed the logic model theory. The four components of the logic model for this action research were:

1. Look and Listen
2. Uncover and Question
3. Reimagine and Design
4. Act and Test

The data collected showed that responsive environments were the byproduct of the job-embedded implementation from the first cycle of the series. Each professional learning session cycle caused participants to engage in a provocative opening, reading research, and discussion

time, and collaborating with peers for an implementation plan. Participants then practiced the selected culturally responsive instructional practice with students, resulting in the intentional creation of inclusive classrooms and fostering more engaging environments. During the learning series, participants adopted a mindset of continuous growth, recognizing that their learning journey would extend well beyond the end of the program.

Theme 1: Responsive Environment

Participants engaged in an interactive PD series during the action research study. The ARIT participated in PD, where the facilitator used culturally responsive techniques in class so that participants could experience the practices as learners before implementing them as teachers. Following each class, participants completed reflective questionnaires where they were asked to describe the impact of the culturally responsive practice on themselves and their students. After each class, the researcher reviewed and uploaded participant responses into Delve to code repeated words or phrases, connected between participants, or relevant to the research questions.

Some initial codes were similar, but many were singular due to the variance of practice implemented. After each cycle, the researcher presented highlights from the questionnaires and focus groups and feedback from the researcher's journal notes to the ARDT during the ARIT planning sessions. The data and follow-up questions the ARDT asked the researcher aided in planning the ARIT professional development sessions and identifying the cycle interventions.

Following the second cycle of questionnaires and the focus group interview, notes and transcriptions were analyzed to identify words that stood out to use for codes. These codes were examined for connections to Research Question 1 (RQ1). Several codes surfaced initially. Some of the similar codes were engagement through anticipation, high student engagement, inclusive participation, equal student participation, comfort and trust building, and positive student

reception. Table 5.3 highlights the data from the questionnaires, focus group, and researcher journal notes to show how responses were categorized into codes that led to the theme.

Table 5.3

ARDT and ARIT coding for Research Question 1

How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?		
Codes	Frequency	Participants
Inclusive Participation	7	4
Engagement and Investment	5	4
Mindset and Emotion	4	3
Student Receptivity	5	3
Relevant and Applicable Techniques	6	4

After comparing the codes to the researcher’s journal notes and the focus group interviews, the codes were categorized into major themes and then collapsed into the overarching theme of “responsive environment” because they all related to how teachers were adapting their practices to create more engaging, inclusive, and positive learning spaces. Through repeated data review, the researcher noted that an emphasis on culturally responsive practices increased student engagement, inclusivity, and a more positive overall atmosphere in their classrooms.

Most teachers spoke about the importance of student voice and creating a space where all students felt comfortable expressing themselves and were engaged in the learning process. Ms. Adara noted that after implementing a culturally responsive instructional practice (dialogic talk) with her students, *“This technique allowed all students to participate and 'have a voice' and 'feel safe' to express their thoughts.”* Several other reflections were explicitly tied to talk structures and using visual literacy to engage students, which surfaced during the data analysis and ARDT meetings. These reflections led to one of the findings of this study.

Finding 2: Specific teaching strategies, like dialogic talk activities and provocation visuals, can enhance student engagement and participation.

ARIT members found that using the culturally responsive practice of provocation by implementing visual literacy effectively initiated conversations and made abstract concepts more accessible to all students. For example, after Cycle 1, Mr. Wade reflected, *“The visual media allowed everyone to engage and share ideas and provided a great bridge to the introduction of loyalty,”* and that this technique helped him have an *“an open discussion about subjects like virtues or loyalty with a group of students who don't all share the same language proficiency.”* Additionally, participants shared that learning about dialogic talk strategies like QSSSA and turn-and-talk during the PD sessions created space for students to share their perspectives, learn from their peers, and actively participate in the learning process.

In her Cycle 2 reflection regarding the QSSSA strategy, Ms. Perez recounted, *“It also gave every student a chance to speak during the share part,”* which was important to her as a bilingual teacher with students in her class with varying levels of English proficiency. A quote from Ms. Adara demonstrated how the QSSSA technique can promote deeper thinking and perspective-taking among students when she stated:

I was pleasantly surprised by the variety and depth of responses that my students were able to come up with...I liked hearing the point of view of other students. Hearing others' point of view helped them to see the situation in a different way & sometimes changed their perspective.

The quotes that support Finding 2 highlight the interconnectedness of these practices. Both visual provocation and dialogic talk support student-centered and inclusive learning, which helps to create a more responsive classroom environment for all learners.

Garvin et al. (2008) emphasized that effective learning environments in organizations rely on concrete processes such as experimentation, systematic data collection and reflective analysis, and ongoing education and training. The data analysis and observation notes from each ARDT and ARIT meeting generated various codes based on reflective protocols, leading to the fourth finding.

Finding 4: Teachers should continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their culturally responsive strategies and make necessary adjustments based on student feedback and classroom observations.

Finding four is not solely about self-reflection; it is specific to reflecting on the impact of implementation. It is a combination of the third and fourth logic model components: reimagine and design and act and test. Participant perceptions included how they evaluated their practices, how students responded, and how they refined their methods based on what they learned through the continuous process. One example is when Ms. Service highlighted how she repeatedly tried different techniques and adjusted them based on her students' responses and her self-evaluation. She stated:

I did have a couple of conversations with individual students and tried to follow this protocol in order to give feedback. I feel like it went well, and it helped the students think critically about their work without being negative... partially due with starting out with positive feedback... I could see this being really beneficial if implemented maybe quarterly with all of my students, possibly in a "mini conference" setting during the class period.

Ms. Adara concurred when she shared:

I thoroughly enjoyed implementing the QSSSA technique with my students. It was definitely more impactful than the previous 'Provocation' technique. I was pleasantly

surprised by the variety and depth of responses that my students were able to come up with.

During the PD sessions, the ARIT engaged in structured reading and discussion. Built-in discussion protocols helped participants gain a deeper understanding, uncover new strategies, and collaboratively explore how strategies could be implemented into their teaching practice. Early in the study, the ARDT helped the lead researcher restructure the sessions to build time for experiencing a culturally responsive practice, reading about various practices based on a Ready for Rigor framework component, and committing to a strategy to implement. In the first two sessions, the participants listened to lectures more than they read, discussed, and practiced. This restructuring allowed for more discussion on a variety of strategies.

Not all strategies were labor intensive but fostered a responsive environment, such as opening the day with a centering activity, creating intentionally affirming warm welcomes at the door during arrival, or even using music or call and response during transitions (Hammond, 2015). After a different session on implementing routines and rituals as a culturally responsive practice, Ms. Perez shared that she would continue to use the morning greeting strategy. In Cycle 3, Ms. Perez observed increased student engagement at the start of the day, noting that her students were *“excited to see me at the door”* and *“Most of them had smiles on their faces before even entering the classroom.”*

During a focus group interview, several participants acknowledged that becoming culturally responsive was not a one-time effort but required daily reflection and practice. While participating in a focus group, Ms. Service expressed the need for educators to continuously evaluate their implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies and adjust as needed, stating, *“It will take practice, but the course helps you to think about it daily. Can’t say it’s*

automatic, but it's a part of your everyday.” Participant responses reinforced the need for continuous evaluation and adjustment of strategies, as stated in Finding Four.

Research Question 2

The second research question in this study sought to understand the role of school leaders in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices. Twenty years of research on school leadership highlights that effective principals are crucial in improving student outcomes, including academic performance, attendance, and behavior (Grissom et al., 2021). The school leader in this research facilitated PD to build teacher capacity in culturally responsive practices.

The Leadership Academy, a leading organization focused on empowering education leaders through transformative professional learning, suggests that school leaders should create courageous spaces to address hard-to-discuss topics focusing on deficit thinking, implicit bias, and forms of racism (Orfield et al., 2019). During the action research cycles, the school leader supported a PLC where complex topics were addressed in psychologically safe environments. The ARDT designed the PD, and the ARIT implemented the interventions that were learned.

The researcher analyzed data from reflective questionnaires, focus groups, and ARDT planning meetings recorded in the researcher’s journal to determine findings and a theme related to the second research question. The review of the data collected was iterative as the researcher reviewed the information several times before coding where repeated patterns emerged, narrowing and collapsing overlapping codes into major themes. The analyzed codes determined the number of occurrences per data source. The researcher then identified and recorded the frequency of codes in the multiple data collection and the number of participants who shared

similar reflections. The ARDT then vetted these codes. Table 5.4 illustrates how the data from the questionnaires, focus group, and researcher journal notes were categorized into codes that led to the theme.

Table 5.4

ARDT and ARIT coding for Research Question 2

What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?			
Codes	Frequency	Participants	
Support and Modeling	3	3	
Continuous Reflection	2	2	
Professional Learning Communities	2	7	
Positive Classroom Culture	1	7	
Feedback practices	1	7	

The major codes aligned with the descriptions of the school leader's role in supporting PLCs and promoting culturally responsive practices. The data revealed the importance of school leaders in modeling strategies and offering ongoing support in PLCs. In the pre-cycle ARDT meeting, the importance of psychological safety was discussed to minimize the impact of subjectivity in the research since the lead researcher was also the facilitator and school principal. In the planning meeting discussion for Cycle 2, ARDT members expressed the importance of participants perceiving the facilitator as a partner going along the learning journey with them.

As such, the ARDT advised the facilitator to structure the class using the same instructional framework teachers had to follow daily in reading and math instruction. To give voice to the ARIT participants, they provided feedback on the direction of the learning topics in the class. This approach was a controlled choice model, where participants could suggest the

order in which they would learn about the Ready for Rigor Framework components. The feedback was shared during ARDT planning sessions to be considered in the following cycle.

Theme 2: Facilitative Leadership

According to Rees (1998), facilitative leadership integrates decisiveness with empowerment by actively involving team members in shaping the vision, executing goals, and fostering collaboration. During the focus group interviews, participants were asked two questions connected to RQ2:

1. What support from your facilitator helped you to implement your learning?
2. How did the design of this PD help you become culturally responsive educators?

Every participant responded positively when describing how the facilitators helped them to implement their learning. ARIT participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of the facilitator modeling their learning strategies. During the PD sessions, the structure, which included explicit modeling and conversation protocols, helped teachers to see and understand how the practices looked in action. During a focus group session, Ms. Romero noted that the session, which included explicit teaching and modeling, was especially helpful. Mr. Wade shared that he enjoyed how the facilitator implemented strategies participants could do with their students in the PD session.

Other participants spoke about the support they felt from the school leader. The data revealed several key insights; the school leader's commitment to continuous support and follow-up was crucial in helping teachers implement new strategies effectively. The PD was beneficial and necessary for the growth of educators and students, as the school leader focused on creating a safe environment for teachers to explore and implement new practices. Ms. Abdul stated, "*The circle backs were helpful,*" referring to when the facilitator sent reminder emails to turn in

reflective journal submissions. Mr. Wade shared that this was one of the few training sessions that resonated with him and gave him helpful knowledge. Ms. Gonzalez, a first-year teacher, contributed to the focus group, sharing that she appreciated that they did not get all the learning at once but were given the learning in chunks.

Finding 3: School leaders play an important role in fostering a supportive learning environment by modeling culturally responsive strategies and offering ongoing support to teachers.

The data revealed that teachers valued seeing their leader actively demonstrate culturally responsive practices. It was important to create a learning environment for professional development that was culturally responsive to model what a culturally responsive classroom would feel like for the participants. Warm welcomes with quotes and music were used during the arrival time for each session. Relevant visuals and collaborative talk structures were provided to ensure voice equity, and participants were given a voice in the learning direction. Feedback from the ARDT was valued and directly incorporated into the design of the PD sessions. The facilitator shared with the ARDT how their individual and collective input led to session structure or content changes.

Creating supportive learning environments enabled participants to share vulnerable reflections on how they needed to confront their cultural biases and shift their thinking. Ms. Perez said that the training caused her to reflect deeply on her teaching. She considered how she had made judgements like “*he’s not trying.*” She shared that she was trying to have more self-awareness now. Ms. Aldara, a veteran teacher with more than 20 years of experience as a classroom teacher, reflected, “*[It] made you look at your cultural background and how you teach in the classroom. [It made] you more sensitive to the cultural background of the kids and how you interact.*” The experience with the safe environments was evidenced by students as

well. Ms. Aldara stated that one of her 5th-grade students shared in class, *“Hearing others’ points of view helped them to see the situation in a different way and sometimes changed their perspective.”* In a separate reflection, Ms. Gifford described using one of the strategies on herself. She applied the Back Talk Strategy by first identifying evidence of her past success to interrupt her negative self-talk. *“My reflection is that I felt like being able to add the evidence made the positive restatement carry more power.”* These quotes illustrate how teachers shifted their mindsets from potentially biased perspectives to more reflective, culturally aware, and student-centered approaches. They also illustrate how a school leader plays an important role in building the capacity of teachers in PD by guiding the learning through a facilitative supportive approach in PLCs.

Research Question 3

The ARDT collaborated with the primary researcher to examine data and develop the interventions. Research Question 3 (RQ3) sought to investigate how an action research team described the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure. For RQ3, the lead researcher collected and analyzed data. Codes were generated based on recurring patterns and key phrases. Table 5.5 presents how the researcher categorized those codes from the various sources to determine the overarching theme. The relevant codes are in column one, with the frequency of occurrences across various data collection methods listed in column two. Column three indicates the number of participants associated with each code.

Table 5.5*ARDT and ARIT coding for Research Question 3*

RQ3: How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?		
Codes	Frequency	Participants
Infusion of Culturally Responsive Practices	2	2
Culturally Relevant Strategies	4	4
Collaboration	1	1
Real-World Connections	2	2
Adaptation of Technique	3	3

After triangulating the data across all data sets, the codes were cross-checked with the researcher's journal notes and transcriptions. In addition, the ARDT vetted codes. The ARDT collaborated with the researcher to identify the overarching theme that emerged from coding the focus group transcripts, research journal notes, and reflective questionnaires. These data sources reflected a desire to move culturally responsive practices beyond individual efforts. The theme of systemic integration emerged from the codes because the action research participants described designing and implementing culturally responsive practices as one that requires embedding these practices beyond individual teacher implementation. This theme suggests that culturally responsive practices be integrated with PD, instructional strategies, and school leadership, making this a key part of the school culture.

Theme 3: Systemic Integration

During the final focus group interview, ARIT members assessed the perceived benefits of culturally responsive teaching and offered justifications for their perspectives. It was noted in the researcher's anecdotal notes that Ms. Aldara, Ms. Abdul, and Mr. Wade all strongly agreed that culturally responsive teaching was beneficial for educators. Ms. Abdul made it clear that she

thought it was “*more than beneficial*” and should be “*mandatory for all staff to go through the training.*” Ms. Aldara stated that she felt “*it brought out the best in students and it caused you to have to know yourself and your students.*” Anecdotal notes from the final ARDT meeting revealed that Mr. Stuart and Ms. Gifford emphasized their desire for the training to be implemented school-wide, rather than being limited to a select group of teachers. The ARIT and ARDT expressed the preference to have all teachers engaged in the work and make PD mandatory, as it was essential for fostering impactful learning environments for students and teachers. The codes, transcriptions, and views from specific participants demonstrated that systemic integration is essential for designing PD that has an impact on the student and educator experience in schools.

Finding 1: Professional development focused on culturally responsive teaching practices can have a positive impact on students, teachers, and leaders in urban elementary schools.

A priority for the ARDT was assessing how the practices aligned with student achievement data because the action research aimed to investigate actions schools could take to close the achievement gaps. During the Cycle 3 post-planning ARDT meeting, the team reviewed evidence from the reflective journals, observation notes, and focus groups. This evidence demonstrated how the responsive environment linked student learning and achievement. The data shared also connected to the third research question, which assessed the perspectives of an action research team that designed and implemented culturally responsive practices in an urban elementary school.

Ms. Gifford shared in her reflective questionnaire that after the PD session about learning partnerships, she implemented a culturally responsive practice for interrupting negative self-talk called the “Back Talk Strategy.” Ms. Gifford added that showing students their MAP Winter

Growth data during a goal setting session, while using that strategy, increased their positive attitude. She felt this helped create psychological safety while making students aware of their academic progress, which she believed also positively impacted learning. The researcher's anecdotal notes indicate that after the March MAP assessment, Ms. Gifford's classroom reading data showed one of the highest growth rates in the Spring 2024 MAP administration. Ms. Adara recalled a direct quote from her students in her reflective questionnaire. The student shared that the Chalk Talk activity (dialogic talk) was *"like a refresher because reading the responses of others helped me to remember more about the topic."*

These reflections supported the finding that teachers' reflections on their implementation of culturally responsive practices enhanced the impact of the student experience and were key in shifting the mindset of teachers to believing that the training should be widespread. The theme of systemic integration supported the finding that PD in culturally responsive teaching can positively impact students, teachers, and leaders by emphasizing the need to move beyond individual efforts and embed these practices into the overall school structure.

Finding 5: Teachers need to be aware that students might initially be hesitant to engage in new activities and that there may be time constraints that impact the implementation of some strategies.

At the start of the action research, ARIT members were hesitant about the additional workload. The researcher noted in the journal that each time she modeled a new strategy, it was a new strategy for all participants. The first few classes exceeded the allotted session time. Timing concerns were raised with the ARDT. The ARDT advised the researcher to slow down and focus on the quality of the content and not the quantity. Slowing down was critical to the process because culturally responsive teaching practices are not about isolated activities but a

pedagogical approach rooted in learning theory (Hammond, 2015). This theme underscores that culturally responsive practices should not be seen as isolated strategies but as an integrated part of the school culture. This can help overcome initial student resistance and logistical challenges through consistent application. Such a shift implies that this type of change takes time, meaning implementing new rigorous changes in the classroom can also take time for students.

The theme of systemic integration aligns with Finding Five because teachers must be aware of student hesitancy, highlighting the importance of embedding culturally responsive practices into the school's structure to address these challenges proactively. Following a mindfulness activity in Cycle 2, Ms. Service expressed, *“Some really liked it, some thought it was silly and didn't really engage... The first time might feel awkward, so it would take multiple times for more children to benefit.”* During Cycle 3, Ms. Ramirez reported that while using the Back Talk Strategy, *“The student seemed a little surprised at this course of dialogue but complied and seemed more at ease practicing the new math skill.”*

The systemic integration theme is important because integrating culturally responsive practices into the entire school structure increases the likelihood of normalizing practices so that they do not feel new, different, or time-consuming to implement. The ARDT's opinions and guidance were critical in shaping the theme of systemic integration. Although they did not directly implement the practices, their recommendations and feedback helped push for the development of a more comprehensive approach. Their input included advocating for mandatory training and recommending integrating culturally responsive practices into all PD.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented five key findings from three action research cycles of data collection, analysis, triangulation, and coding. The findings were identified through data collected from focus group discussions, meeting transcripts, and questionnaires provided by both the Action Research Design and Implementation Teams. The theoretical framework informed the development of these findings and themes of culturally responsive learning theory. Furthermore, the findings were aligned with the three research questions. Based on the key findings and themes explained in this chapter, Chapter 6 presents the study conclusions and discusses implications and recommendations for practice.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Academic achievement is one of the most significant indicators for gauging student success and education. (Ye et al., 2019). In the United States, this continues to be hard to evaluate for students of color because of inequities that lead to the academic achievement gap. School leaders are responsible for promoting and fostering educational experiences that prioritize the cultural and unique learning needs of multilingual, low-income, or students of color who have been historically marginalized (Gooden et al., 2023). Some school leaders do this by implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is a set of beliefs teachers have about themselves, the science of learning, students, and relationship building. These mindsets frame classroom experiences, improving student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, paving the way to improved student performance (Ladson-Billings, 2021). However, school leaders should not hold teachers accountable for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices unless teachers have explicit instruction through professional development (PD). PD is essential in improving the academic performance of underdeveloped and underachieving students of color (Gay, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of elementary school teachers as they learned and implemented culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms, specifically in reading and math. This study investigated the perspectives of the leader

facilitating professional learning and observing the implementation of culturally responsive teaching, the implications of underperforming subgroups of students, and the impact of professional learning on the student achievement gap.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?

Chapter 6 summarizes the study and discusses the findings. It describes how the literature supported the findings and concludes by outlining the limitations and providing recommendations for school and district leaders, policy, and further research.

Summary of the Findings and Themes

This action research study examined the impact of PD focused on culturally responsive teaching practices in an urban elementary school. It involved a collaborative process between the researcher, who also served as the school principal, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT), and the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). These educators participated in a semester-long study on culturally responsive teaching practices.

To design a PD series, the researcher collaborated with the ARDT and the ARIT to learn about culturally responsive practices. The series responded to the racial academic achievement gap in Boston Academy (BA) reading levels. The researcher used reflective questionnaires, focus groups, and the researcher's reflective journal as data sources to understand the impact of implementing the strategies on student engagement and learning environments. The focus groups and monthly ARDT planning meetings refined and steered the direction of the PD. The researcher's journal logged the ongoing observations made in PD. The researcher coded and triangulated all data to identify themes and patterns from the action research PD.

After analyzing the data and reflecting on the research, five findings surfaced. The first finding indicated that PD focused on culturally responsive teaching practices can positively impact urban elementary school students, teachers, and leaders. The second finding uncovered that specific teaching strategies, such as dialogic talk activities and visual provocations, enhance student engagement and participation.

The third finding identified that school leaders play an important role in fostering a supportive learning environment by modeling culturally responsive strategies and offering ongoing support to teachers. This support included modeling effective strategies, providing continuous feedback, and offering ongoing encouragement, which were essential for translating theory into practice. The fourth finding articulated that teachers should continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their culturally responsive strategies and make necessary adjustments based on student feedback and classroom observations. The fifth finding revealed that teachers need to be aware that students might initially be hesitant to engage in new activities and that time constraints may impact the implementation of some strategies.

The findings were categorized into three themes, which further clarified the insights gained from the study. The themes and research questions were then aligned with the theoretical framework. Data analysis identified three major themes: responsive environments, facilitative leadership, and systemic integration.

Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed

Finding One: Professional development focused on culturally responsive teaching practices can have a positive impact on students, teachers, and leaders in urban elementary schools.

The literature review supports the action research findings, emphasizing the critical role of culturally responsive teaching in addressing the achievement gap. Researchers have found a strong correlation with improved student achievement when teachers implement culturally responsive practices (Dyer 2015, and Toth 2021). Cuffee (2020) found a decrease in student engagement when educators failed to acknowledge and understand cultural differences in the classroom setting. The first finding is consistent with research indicating that the quality of teaching is the most significant factor in student academic success (Cantrell et al., 2022). Student engagement and achievement are essential components of effective teaching and learning. Therefore, educators must develop innovative and practical strategies to engage students and actively enhance their academic success (Hoytt et al., 2022).

While schools continue to face challenges with closing the achievement gap, developing the professional knowledge of teachers may have positive implications for overcoming this challenge. Hattie (2005) asserted that the teacher makes a difference in teaching and learning. This action research study integrated the understanding that teachers have significant impacts on learning, culturally responsive teaching practices have been shown to impact minoritized students, and PD is a much-needed process for improving the teaching capacity of teachers. It is

important to note that while there is growing awareness of culturally responsive teaching, the topic is not widely emphasized in teacher preparation programs or local school PD (Mitchell, 2019).

Furthermore, Popova et al. (2021) argued that teachers in many low- and middle-income countries often lack the essential skills for effective instruction. To address this challenge, governments primarily rely on professional development programs to improve teaching practices. Gay (2010) argued that beliefs and attitudes always precede and shape behaviors (p. 49). The PD series in this action research study incorporated reading and protocols designed to influence teachers' beliefs and attitudes. Based on the reflections from ARIT members, teachers saw correlations to enhancing academic achievement and student well-being by using culturally responsive practices learned from a PD series similar to a previous study (Cholewa et al., 2014). This is aligned with research that says PD is a critical link in improved educational practice and can even lead to school reform (Knapp, 2003).

Finding Two: Specific teaching strategies, like dialogic talk activities, along with the use of provocation visuals, can enhance student engagement and participation.

Inequity by design is a term that describes the underdeveloped cognitive information processing skills of diverse students (Hammond, 2015). During Cycle 3, the facilitator incorporated this concept into the PD series, specifically emphasizing deficit thinking. Childs and Wooten (2022) asserted that deficit thinking occurs when teachers hold lower expectations or treat students differently based on perceived challenges or barriers in their lives, reinforcing negative stereotypes or assumptions about their families and academic abilities. Reaching back over 60 years, deficit-based approaches to education—prominent before and during the 1960s and 1970s—framed the languages, literacies, and cultural identities of many students and

communities of color as barriers that needed to be overcome to conform to the dominant language, literacy, and schooling norms that were prioritized and legitimized (Paris, 2012).

To foster a dynamic and engaging learning environment, educators should encourage students to think critically through thought-provoking activities beyond conventional approaches (Paolini, 2015). The second finding in the research identified that specific teaching strategies, such as dialogic talk activities and visual provocations, enhance student engagement. Helping students actively process information is at the heart of culturally responsive teaching because new content sticks best when it connects to what students already know. Cognitive routines make this easier by guiding students through challenging tasks and allowing them to talk through their thinking (Hammond, 2015).

Talking to learn, also called dialogic talk, is a valuable strategy. Yıldırım and Uzun (2021) suggested that when teachers apply this approach, they enhance learning through interactive discussions where students share ideas, engage in reasoning, think critically, and express their perspectives. The PD participants found that using techniques like QSSSA (Question, Signal, Stem, Share, and Assess) and Chalk Talk aligned with research that promotes student-centered, inclusive discussions. These types of activities are rooted in oral tradition. They make thinking visible. According to Ritchart (2015), making thinking visible maximizes learning by encouraging students to share ideas, reason through concepts, and engage in critical discussions. This interactive process fosters culturally responsive classrooms as students deepen their understanding, articulate their thoughts, and refine their perspectives.

Finding Three: School leaders play an important role in fostering a supportive learning environment by modeling culturally responsive strategies and offering ongoing support to teachers.

“It is the role of an instructional leader to share their enhanced instructional knowledge and skills with teachers, instructing teachers who then instruct students, and thus potentially transforming learning and teaching” (White & McCallum, 2020, p. 201). Leaders collaborate with staff to establish a culture, systems, and mindsets that foster ongoing professional learning. By providing support and accountability, leaders help teachers enhance their practice through a deeper understanding of student learning needs, data-informed instructional decisions, and ongoing assessment within a framework of high expectations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). The third finding is recurrent in the literature (Brown et al., 2021; Gooden et al., 2023; Leithwood, 2021).

The school leader facilitated a semester-long PD series in this study. School leaders can support teacher development by providing consistent feedback and creating safe and welcoming school environments for children and adults. Grissom et al. (2021) reported that successful principals orchestrate professional learning, recognizing the characteristics of high-impact PD and ensuring teachers participate in high-quality PD. Not only is professional development important, but so is the psychological safety of staff members. After the first implementation cycle, the ARDT emphasized maintaining a supportive environment for teachers. Yukl (2012) proposed in the hierarchical taxonomy that leadership behaviors such as supporting and developing heavily influence team performance. The data collected in this research showed that participants favored the school leader modeling practices, consistent with Leithwood (2021), who stated, “Leading by example, or modeling, is associated with authentic and ethical approaches to leadership” (p. 13).

Finding Four: Teachers should continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their culturally responsive strategies and make necessary adjustments based on student feedback and classroom observations.

The fourth finding is supported by the action research methodology, which is described in the literature as a cyclical process that involves continuous reflection and improvement. The cyclical process of qualitative inquiry and the iterative nature of action research are highly compatible (Maxwell, 2021). The finding undergirds the literature, suggesting that effective PD allows teachers to evaluate their progress.

Ciampa and Gallagher (2015) suggested that when teachers reflect on their instructional practices, they become more aware of their teaching methods. This awareness allows them to recognize and move away from ineffective strategies that may hinder student learning. At the end of each cycle, ARIT members reflected on their practices. Many of them adjusted their instruction based on self-reflection, student feedback, and peer discussions, fostering a collaborative culture that improved student learning (Mizell, 2010). Reflective thinking is essential to effective teaching, helping improve student learning outcomes (Dinham et al., 2020).

Finding Five: Teachers need to be aware that students might initially be hesitant to engage in new activities and that there may be time constraints that impact the implementation of some strategies.

The final finding was more nuanced but important to the research. First, it is supported by the literature, which argues that culturally responsive teaching is not just about teaching methods; it is a comprehensive philosophy (Banks, 2021). Such an approach requires a mindset shift, which naturally takes time. This has implications not only for students and their hesitancy but also for adult learners. The researcher observed the time it took for teachers to feel

comfortable and the time it took for the facilitator to identify an instructional structure that promoted discussion and collaboration. In the data collected from the reflective questionnaires, teachers reported how students needed time to adjust to the different protocols and practices. Equitable school leaders recognize the gaps between their staff's beliefs and practices and those needed to create more inclusive opportunities and improve outcomes for underserved students (Leithwood, 2021). These effects require more time for the teacher and learner to effectively implement.

PD as an intervention helped mitigate the hesitancy of the adult learners on the action research team. Hesitancy or resistance is expected and can be decreased by practical training to alleviate performance concerns when adopting new strategies (Dahal & Bhat, 2023). As Ms. Service shared, the research suggests that teachers should persist when students resist change, especially in practices that foster active learning (Reuell, 2019). Study participants, who were teachers, demonstrated patience with students and themselves as they experienced new learning strategies.

Additionally, the research provides guidance that is equally beneficial for teachers of students and facilitators of adult learners. Tharayil et al. (2018) advised that instructors can reduce student resistance through clear explanations of purpose, expectations, and activities while using facilitation strategies that foster engagement, such as encouragement, structured routines, and active participation techniques. These researchers highlight the importance of these approaches and identify previously examined culturally responsive strategies that support student involvement.

Major Themes Related to the Research Questions

In Chapter 5, the researcher presented the findings of the research questions. The findings were analyzed and reviewed to determine overarching themes. The major themes of the study were responsive environment, facilitative leadership, and systemic integration. Table 6.1 below summarizes the themes in alignment with the research questions and the theoretical framework.

Table 6.1

Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
RQ1: How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?	• Culturally Responsive Teaching • Cultural Competence & Awareness • Teacher & Student Relationships • Supportive Learning Environments	Theme 1 – Responsive Environment
RQ2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?	• Learning Leaders Create Learning Cultures • Culturally Responsive Teaching,	Theme 2 – Facilitative Leadership
RQ3: How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?	• Learning Processes & Practices • Culturally Relevant Pedagogy • Supportive Learning Environments	Theme 3 – Systemic Integration

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
	• Social Justice	

Research Question 1 (RQ1) asked, "How do teachers describe the impact of their learning environments following professional development focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?" The first theme, Responsive Environment, is linked to this research question, as well as cultural competence and supportive learning environments in the theoretical framework. The data collected and the researcher's notes in the Spring of 2024 showed that strategies like affirmations, Turn and Talk, and QSSSA made learning environments more inclusive. This positively impacted student engagement and classroom participation. Based on feedback from the ARDT, the researcher restructured the environments to be more inclusive by using more dialogic talk for the ARIT during the PD sessions. These strategies aligned with creating a learning environment that is equitable and supportive for all learners, with a focus on cultural awareness and responsiveness (Hammond, 2015). Some participants reflected on becoming more aware of their biases and adapting to their students' diverse cultural backgrounds.

Researcher Question 2 (RQ2) asked, "What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve instructional practices based on learning about and implementing culturally responsive practices?" Theme 2, facilitative leadership, directly aligned with RQ2. The school leader, the lead researcher and facilitator of the PD, played a key role by modeling strategies and providing continuous support, which helped teachers implement culturally responsive practices. The ARDT & ARIT valued the ongoing support from the facilitator/primary researcher, especially in helping them reflect on their

practice and adapt strategies over time. This feedback aligns with the concept of leadership as a critical component in the effective implementation of culturally responsive teaching, as identified by Gay (2010).

Researcher Question 3 (RQ3) asked, “How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing culturally responsive practices in an elementary school structure?” Theme 3, derived from the data analysis, was systemic integration. The action research indicated that culturally responsive practices should be integrated into the overall school structure and PD design, emphasizing the importance of a systemic approach. There was a focus on building trust and positive relationships through positive reinforcement and collaborative efforts to design inclusive practices.

Teachers also emphasized using culturally relevant strategies, such as Chalk Talk and Turn and Talk, which made content accessible to all students. These findings are linked to culturally relevant pedagogy concepts, which advocate for creating a learning environment that values all students’ backgrounds and fosters critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2021). The key themes reflected an understanding that effective culturally responsive teaching requires teacher awareness, leadership support, and a focus on practical strategies that support all learners, not in isolation but infused throughout the fabric of the instructional environment.

Limitations of the Current Study

While the researcher, the ARDT, and ARIT designed and implemented this study with detailed planning and consideration, limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The first limitation was the researcher serving as both the school principal and the PD facilitator, which could introduce bias. That dual role might have influenced the participants’ responses, which could have influenced the overall outcomes of the study. To mitigate this bias,

the researcher worked with the ARDT to create a psychologically safe environment where teachers felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences, using the BA instructional design for PD sessions to align with existing practices rather than imposing a top-down approach. Additionally, the researcher modeled new strategies alongside teachers and made it clear that their implementation of new standards would not be part of any formal evaluation.

The small sample size of participants limited the study. Although 48 staff members could have participated in the PD, only eight chose to enroll and agreed to participate. The researcher thought it was important that only participants who showed interest in the class by voluntarily signing up would be the best staff to request consent from. Although the participants represented various departments, grade levels, and leadership roles, they still represented the entire school staff.

Another study limitation was how participants self-reported their data through reflective questionnaires. Participants did not have to provide video or artifacts to prove that the implementation occurred. Adding this component to a future study would help further solidify the findings. Although the researcher attempted to reduce the subjectivity through data triangulation, the potential for subjective responses remained. Additionally, time constraints limited the study, as some participants felt that they did not have sufficient time to fully implement the culturally responsive practices and complete the associated reflection activities. This limitation was particularly identified in the ARIT reflections when they implemented the assess-based feedback protocol, which required more one-on-one interaction time.

Finally, the study focused on teachers' perspectives. It did not directly measure student outcomes, which limits the ability to link the implementation of culturally responsive practices to

improved student achievement definitively. While teachers reported perceived positive impacts on student engagement, a direct correlation with student academic progress was not established.

The following sections provide recommendations aligned with the research findings, emerging themes, and reviewed literature. They begin with an outline of the implications and suggestions for urban school leaders and district administrators.

Implications and Recommendations for School and District Leaders

School and district leaders have several key implications and recommendations for implementing culturally responsive practices into the school system. To begin, they should prioritize ongoing, job-embedded PD. This means determining times that are already built into the master schedule and school calendar for teachers to participate in PD, as well as building structures of support job-embedding practice to implement culturally responsive practices. Additionally, school leaders should encourage and model strategies for building relationships and offer professional development centered on strengthening teacher-student partnerships while promoting a school-wide culture that values and validates the identities of all students through culturally responsive practices.

School leaders must ensure that the culture reflects culturally responsive teaching principles by reviewing existing practices and policies to guarantee inclusivity and that teachers receive ongoing PD infused with culturally responsive practices. The Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework highlights that equity-focused leadership involves critically examining how educational systems have contributed to systemic inequities (Gooden et al., 2023).

Lastly, school leaders can promote practices like creating opportunities for student voice, prioritizing cognitive routines, and establishing practices for dialogic talk and other practices

aligned to cultural responsiveness. They should also establish structures that facilitate regular teacher reflection and peer feedback, which includes implementing systems for teachers to observe other classrooms and offer constructive feedback on strategies to improve culturally responsive practices.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy

Effectively educating African American students remains one of the most pressing matters facing educators in America (Milner & Howard, 2004); however, considering the current political climate, which has shown resistance to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, school and district leaders must be strategic in their approach to fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments. It is critical to reframe culturally responsive teaching to enhance academic outcomes for all students, emphasizing its potential to improve student engagement, critical thinking, and overall achievement, rather than focusing solely on historical inequities. School and district leaders can also highlight research indicating the positive impacts of culturally responsive practices on psychological safety. By casting culturally responsive teaching as a universal strategy for academic excellence, school leaders may be able to navigate political sensitivities while still promoting effective teaching methods.

It is important to present culturally responsive teaching as opportunities for growth and continuous improvement that benefit all students rather than as politically charged mandates. By highlighting the potential for culturally responsive teaching to improve school culture, leaders can promote these practices as beneficial for all school community members. It is also important for school and district leaders to integrate culturally responsive practices into school and district policies, such as curriculum development, assessment practices, and teacher mentoring programs.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

This section considers the limitations of the study and potential subjectivity when discussing implications and recommendations. A single researcher conducted the research with a small group of teachers at an urban elementary school. Future research should explore various aspects of culturally responsive practices amongst a more significant number of participants and seek out findings that have not yet been widely examined. It will also be essential to investigate the long-term effects of integrating culturally responsive teaching practices in schools, especially among diverse student populations. This action research study followed the impact of a six-session PD series. Future researchers may benefit from following longer PD cycles.

Future studies should explore how school leadership directly influences the sustainability of culturally responsive teaching in schools. This study tracked implementation over four months. Furthermore, studies should explore whether teachers maintained those practices long-term and if the school leader could sustain this level of involvement with PD facilitation, which would be valuable.

Expanded research should investigate how various leadership styles influence teachers' ability to implement culturally responsive teaching interventions. The facilitator in this study employed a facilitative leadership approach. Future research should examine leaders with varying styles, as leadership approaches shape relationships and influence teacher engagement. Researchers should also examine leaders across different school types and grade-level bands within a district. Since this study was conducted at an elementary school, future research should explore whether staff buy-in and faculty composition differ in middle and high school settings. This study did not include a structured data collection component to measure the impact on student achievement. Further investigation should look at the impact of this model on teacher

self-efficacy, long-term application of culturally responsive practices, and if the achievement gap decreases, especially for historically marginalized students. This might even include hosting “learning walks” to see how students respond to the curriculum in the classroom (Gooden et al., 2023).

Lastly, future research should investigate the obstacles teachers face in implementing culturally responsive practices, such as lack of time, insufficient resources, or resistance from colleagues and students. Research should also focus on strategies to overcome these barriers, including policy changes, political climate, administrative support, and creating safe spaces for educators to discuss challenges.

Concluding Thoughts

Research in K -12 and adult education suggests that, when designed effectively, PD can enhance teaching skills and impact (Smith & Gillespie, 2023). This action research study emphasized the importance of culturally responsive teaching as a practical approach to maximize teacher practice and the learning environment. The findings show that when BA teachers implemented culturally responsive practices, doing so led to increased student engagement, improved teacher-student relationships, and a more inclusive classroom atmosphere. The study also highlighted the critical role of school leaders in supporting and sustaining these practices through PD, modeling, and fostering a culture of development and support. Learning and academic success are achievable across diverse student populations by creating an environment where all learners (adult or child) feel seen, valued, and empowered.

What is the most effective way to shift school culture and processes? The themes of responsive environments, facilitative leadership, and systemic integration demonstrate that culturally responsive practices are most effective when embedded in the broader school context.

However, job-embedded practice also seemed to be an impactful strategy. Job-embedded PD, which became more common in the 1990s, brings training directly into schools by making it more meaningful and applicable for teachers in a contextually specific manner. During the implementation cycles of this study, BA teachers approached job-embedded PD similarly to Smith and Gillespie (2023). They engaged in study circles and inquiry groups and shaped their learning while tackling real challenges their students faced, leading to more effective and relevant teaching practices.

Teacher self-reflection was also a powerful intervention. The study highlighted the benefits of teachers participating in ongoing self-reflection. Pannell (n.d.) asserted that self-reflection is key to helping educators grow and improve their practice. To truly understand and support students, teachers must first take the time to reflect on their own experiences, biases, and approaches. This self-awareness strengthens relationships and leads to better decision-making in the classroom.

While implementing these practices may require time and effort, the research suggests that, culturally responsive educational practices aimed at bridging the gap between school culture and the diverse cultural backgrounds of students of color by incorporating their cultural perspectives and a strength-based approach have positive academic outcomes (Cholewa et al., 2014; Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Implementing culturally responsive teaching PD has substantial implications for closing the achievement gap. School and district leaders in WPS and beyond can create more equitable learning environments by prioritizing culturally responsive teaching in policy development, curriculum standards, and teacher training. Despite the challenges posed by the political climate, school and district leaders can strategically promote culturally responsive teaching to enhance academic outcomes for all students.

REFERENCES

- Addy, T. M., Reeves, P. M., Dube, D., & Mitchell, K. A. (2021). What really matters for instructors implementing equitable and inclusive teaching approaches? *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, 40(1). <https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.182>
- Anderson, J.D. (1988). *The education of blacks in the south, 1860-1935*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Ansari, A., Hofkens, T. L., & Pianta, R. C. (2020). Teacher-student relationships across the first seven years of education and adolescent outcomes. 71, 101200.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101200>
- Aronson, B., & Laughter, J. (2016). The theory and practice of culturally relevant education. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(1), 163–206.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315582066>
- Banks, J. A. (2021). *Transforming multicultural education policy and practice: Expanding educational opportunity*. Teachers College Press.
- Basma, B., & Savage, R. (2017). Teacher professional development and student literacy growth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30(2), 457–481.
- Bloomberg, D. (2023). *Completing your qualitative dissertation*. SAGE Publications.
- Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)
- Brown, J. C., & Crippen, K. J. (2016). Designing for culturally responsive science education through professional development. *International Journal of Science Education*, 38(3), 470–492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2015.1136756>

- Brown, M., Altrichter, H., Shiyan, I., Rodríguez Conde, M. J., McNamara, G., Herzog-Punzenberger, B., Vorobyeva, I., Vangrando, V., Gardezi, S., O'Hara, J., Postlbauer, A., Milyaeva, D., Sergeevna, N., Fulterer, S., García, A. G., & Sánchez, L. (2021). Challenges and opportunities for culturally responsive leadership in schools: Evidence from four European countries. *Policy Futures in Education*, 20(5), 580–607. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103211040909>
- Brown, P. C., Roediger III, H. L., & McDaniel, M. A. (2014). *Make it stick: The science of successful learning*. Harvard University Press.
- Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.
- Ciampa, K., & Gallagher, T.L. (2015). Blogging to enhance in-service teachers' professional learning and development during collaborative inquiry. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 63(6), 883-913, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-015-9404-7>
- Cantrell, S. C., Sampson, S. O., Perry, K. H., & Robershaw, K. (2022). The impact of professional development on in-service teachers' culturally responsive practices and students' reading achievement. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 62(3), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2022.2130117>
- Cherfas, L., Casciano, R., & Wiggins, M. A. (2021). It's bigger than hip-hop: Estimating the impact of a culturally responsive classroom intervention on student outcomes. *Urban Education*, 56(10), 1748–1781. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918789729>
- Childs, T. M., & Wooten, N. R. (2022). Teacher bias matters: An integrative review of correlates, mechanisms, and consequences. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 26(3), 368–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2122425>

- Cholewa, B., Goodman, R. D., West-Olatunji, C., & Amatea, E. (2014). A qualitative examination of the impact of culturally responsive educational practices on the psychological well-being of students of color. *The Urban Review*, 46(4), 574–596.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-014-0272-y>
- Coghlan, D., & Brannick, T. (2019). *Doing action research in your own organization*. SAGE.
- Corey, S.M. (1954). Action research in education. *The Journal of Education Research*, 47(5), 375–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1954.10882121>
- Cuffee, D. (2020). *Culturally responsive teaching in the classroom*. [Master's Theses & Capstone Projects, Northwestern College].
https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters/260/
- Dahal, A., & Bhat, N. (2023). Self-directed learning, its implementation, and challenges: A review. *Nepal Journal of Health Sciences*, 3(1), 102–115.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/njhs.v3i1.63277>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R. C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*. National Staff Development Council. ERIC.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED536383>
- Deming, W. E. (1993). *The new economics for industry, government, education* (2nd ed.). Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Study.
- Dinham, J., Choy, S. C., Williams, P., & Yim, J. S. C. (2020). Effective teaching and the role of reflective practices in the Malaysian and Australian education systems: A scoping review. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 49(4), 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866x.2020.1824267>

- Duncan-Andrade, J. (2007). Gangstas, wankstas, and ridas: Defining, developing, and supporting effective teachers in urban schools. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20(6), 617–638. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701630767>
- Dyer, K. (2015, September 17). Research proof points – better student engagement improves student learning #edchat. *Teach. Learn. Grow*.
<https://www.nwea.org/blog/2015/research-proof-points-better-student-engagement-improves-student-learning/>
- Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981, Pub. L. No. 97-35, 95 Stat. 357 (1981).
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-bill/3941>
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (1965).
<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/essa-act-of-1965.pdf>
- Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177>
- Fien, H., Smith, J. L. M., Smolkowski, K., Baker, S. K., Nelson, N. J., & Chaparro, E. (2014). An examination of the efficacy of a multitiered intervention on early reading outcomes for first-grade students at risk for reading difficulties. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 48(6). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219414521664>.
- Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a factor in Black students' school success: Pragmatic strategy or pyrrhic victory? *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), 54–84.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.58.1.c5r77323145r7831>
- Garvin, D. A., Edmondson, A. C., & Gino, F. (2008). Is yours a learning organization?. *Harvard Business Review*, 86(3), 109–134.

- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003>
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Georgia Insights. (2022). *Georgia insights*. Retrieved March 14, 2023, from <https://www.georgiainsights.com/>
- Givens, J. R. (2021). *Fugitive pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching*. Harvard University Press.
- Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA). (2021). Georgia schools like mine. <https://schoolslikemine.gosa.ga.gov/>
- Glanz, J. (2014). *Action research: An educational leader's guide to school improvement*. (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gooden, M. A., Khalifa, M., Arnold, N. W., Brown, K. D., Meyers, C. V., Welsh, R. O., & The Wallace Foundation. (2023). A culturally responsive school leadership approach to developing equity-centered principals: Considerations for principal pipelines. In *The Wallace Foundation*. https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/Culturally-responsive-school-leadership-approach_06.29.FINALforposting.pdf
- Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research*. The Wallace Foundation. <https://doi.org/10.59656/el-sb1065.001>

Gunaratnam, Y. (2003). *Researching race and ethnicity: Methods, knowledge, and power*. Sage Publications.

Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain*. Corwin.

Hattie, J. (2005). *What is the nature of evidence that makes a difference to learning?*

[Conference Presentation]. ACER Research Using Data to Support Learning Conference 2005, Melbourne, Australia. https://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2005/7

Hawkins, B. D. (1994). Casualties: Losses among Black educators were a predictable outcome of school desegregation. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(1), 31-35.

Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-297, 102 Stat. 130 (1988).

Hess, F. M., & Eden, M. (Eds.). (2017). *The every student succeeds act: What it means for schools, systems, and states*. Harvard Education Press.

Hoytt, K., Hunt, S., & Lovett, M. A. (2022). Impact of cultural responsiveness on student achievement in secondary schools. *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership*, 9, 1–12. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1362100>

Hudson, M.J., & Holmes, B.J. (1994). Missing teachers, impaired communities: The unanticipated consequences of Brown v. Board of Education on the African American teaching force at the precollegiate level. *Journal of Negro Education*, 63, 388.

Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-382, 108 Stat. 3518 (1994).

Johnston, O., Wildy, H., & Shand, J. (2021). “Believe in me, and I will too”: A study of how teachers’ expectations instilled confidence in grade 10 students. *Social Psychology of Education*, 24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-021-09668-1>

- Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., Nixon, R. (2014). Doing critical participatory action research: The ‘planner’ part. *The Action Research Planner* (pp. 85–114). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4560-67-2_5
- King, S. H. (1993). What anti-racist teachers do differently. *Education Week*, 12(26), 31.
- Knapp, M. S. (2003). Chapter 4: Professional development as a policy pathway. *Review of Research in Education*, 27(1), 109–157. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x027001109>
- Krasnoff, B. (2016). *Culturally responsive teaching - A guide to evidence-based practices for teaching all students equitably*. Region X Equity Assistance Center Education Northwest.
<https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/culturally-responsive-teaching-508.pdf>
- LoBue, V., & Ogren, M. (2022). How the emotional environment shapes the emotional life of the child. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 9(1), 137–144.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23727322211067264>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). *Culturally relevant pedagogy: Asking a different question*. Teachers College Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). Three decades of culturally relevant, responsive, & sustaining pedagogy: What lies ahead? *The Educational Forum*, 85(4), 351–354.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2021.1957632>
- Leithwood, K. (2021). A review of evidence about equitable school leadership. *Education Sciences*, 11(8), 377. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080377>
- Linton, C. (2011). *Equity 101. Book 1, The equity framework*. Corwin Press.

- Lorenz, G. (2021). Subtle discrimination: Do stereotypes among teachers trigger bias in their expectations and widen ethnic achievement gaps?. *Social Psychology of Education*, 24, 537–571. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-021-09615-0>
- Mahfouz, J., & Anthony-Stevens, V. (2020). *Why trouble SEL? The need for cultural relevance in SEL. Occasional Paper Series*, (43). <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2020/iss43/6>
- Masters, J. (1995). *The history of action research*. Action Research Electronic Reader, The University of Sydney. <http://www.behs.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow/Reader/rmasters.html>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2021). Why qualitative methods are necessary for generalization. *Qualitative Psychology*, 8(1), 111–118. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000173>
- McKinsey & Company. (2007). *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*. McKinsey & Company.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass, Cop.
- Milner, H. R., & Howard, T. C. (2004). Black teachers, black students, black communities, and brown: Perspectives and insights from experts. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 73(3), 285. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4129612>
- Mitchell, C. (2019, March 28). States' standards for teachers don't define culturally responsive teaching, study argues. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/states-standards-for-teachers-dont-define-culturally-responsive-teaching-study-argues/2019/03>
- Mizell, H. (2010). *Why professional development matters*. Learning Forward.
- Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic Inc.

- Murakami, E. T., Gurr, D., & Notman, R. (Eds.). (2019). *Educational leadership, culture, and success in high-need schools (International Research on School Leadership)*. Information Age Publishing.
- Murphy, J. (2015). *Creating instructional capacity: A framework for creating academic press*. Corwin
- The Nation's Report Card. (2022). NAEP reading: National achievement-level results. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2016)
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E., & Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Orfield, E. A. (2019). *Culturally responsive leadership: A framework for school and school system leaders* [Report]. The Leader Academy. <https://www.leadershipacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Culturally-Responsive-Leadership-Actions-2020.pdf>
- Pannell, A., & Cato. (n.d.). Embracing diversity: Immersing culturally responsive pedagogy in our school systems. https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/pdf_archive/07_pannell.pdf
- Paolini, A. (2015). Enhancing teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 15(1), 20–33. ERIC. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1060429.pdf>
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x12441244>
- Poekert, P.E., Swaffield, S., Demir, E.K., & Wright, S.A. (2020). Leadership for professional learning towards educational equity: A systematic literature review. *Professional*

Development in Education, 46(4), 541-562.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1787209>

- Popova, A., Evans, D. K., Breeding, M. E., & Arancibia, V. (2021). Teacher professional development around the world: The gap between evidence and practice. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 37(1), 107–136. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkab006>
- Rees, F. (1998). *The facilitator excellence handbook: Helping people work creatively and productively together*. Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.
- Reuell, P. (2019, September 4). *Lessons in learning*. Harvard Gazette.
<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/09/study-shows-that-students-learn-more-when-taking-part-in-classrooms-that-employ-active-learning-strategies/>
- Ritchhart, R. (2015). *Creating cultures of thinking: The 8 forces we must master to truly transform our schools*. Jossey-Bass.
- Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F. (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417-458.
- Safir, S., & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data: a next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*. Corwin.
- Saldana, J., & Omasta, M. (2021). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Sancar, R., Atal, D., & Deryakulu, D. (2021). A new framework for teachers' professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 101, 103305. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103305>
- Sarder, R. (2016). *Building an innovative learning organization: A framework to build a smarter workforce, adapt to change, and drive growth*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

- Shukla, S. Y., Theobald, E. J., Abraham, J. K., & Price, R. M. (2022). Reframing educational outcomes: Moving beyond achievement gaps. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 21(2), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.21-05-0130>
- Smith, C., & Gillespie, M. (2023). Research on professional development and teacher change: Implications for adult basic education. In Routledge eBooks, *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy, Volume 7* (pp. 205–244). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003417996-7>
- Soine, K. M., & Lumpe, A. (2014). Measuring characteristics of teacher professional development. *Teacher Development*, 18(3), 303-333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2014.911775>
- Song, J. (2015, May 10). Educators and advocates highlight new strategies to close the achievement gap. *National Education Association (NEA)*. <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/educators-and-advocates-highlight-new-strategies-close-achievement-gap>
- State Department of Education. (2023). Effective instructional practices resource for leaders: State’s K-12 mathematics.
- Taie, S., & Lewis, L. (2023). *Teacher attrition and mobility. Results from the 2021–22 teacher follow-up survey to the national teacher and principal survey (NCES 2024-039)*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Retrieved October 11, 2023, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2024039>
- Teel, K. M. & Obidah, J.E. (2008). *Building racial and cultural competence in the classroom: Strategies from urban educators*. Teachers College Press.

- Tharayil, S., Borrego, M., Prince, M., Nguyen, K. A., Shekhar, P., Finelli, C. J., & Waters, C. (2018). Strategies to mitigate student resistance to active learning. *International Journal of STEM Education*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-018-0102-y>
- Thompson, M., & William, D. (2007). *Tight but loose: A conceptual framework for scaling up school reform*. [Annual Meeting Presentation]. American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Toth, M. (2021, March 17). Why student engagement is important in a post-COVID world. *Learning Sciences International*. <https://www.learningsciences.com/blog/why-is-student-engagement-important/>
- U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2016). K-12 education: Better use of information could help agencies identify disparities and address racial discrimination. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-16-345>
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Every student succeeds act (ESSA). Retrieved March 17, 2021, from <https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>.
- Watkins, W. H. (2001). *The White architects of Black education: Ideology and power in America: 1865-1954*. Teachers College Press
- White, M. A., & McCallum, F. (2020). *Critical perspectives on teaching, learning and leadership: Enhancing educational outcomes*. Springer Nature.
- Yıldırım, S. & Uzun, S. (2021). An overview of dialogic teaching and its impact on learning. *International Journal of Education, Technology and Science (IJETS)*, 1(2), 135–153.
- Yukl, G. (2012, December). Effective leadership behavior: What we know and what questions need more attention. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 26(4), 66-85. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2012.0088>

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Letter – Action Research Design Team UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SERIES

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: Shavaun Mincey

University of Georgia, Department of Lifelong Education,
Administration, and Policy
Shavaun.mincey@apsk12.org
404-802-8350

This research study seeks to determine the structures and support systems that foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional learning series. You are being invited to be in this study because you are an educator directly involved in the development and facilitation of the Culturally Responsiveness course. You are being asked to share your perspective on the process of designing and implementing a professional learning course aimed at increasing educators' cultural competence and proficiency.

By participating in this study, you will be part of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT). The ARDT will work together to make decisions and interpret data centered on the Culturally Responsiveness course. In addition, the ARDT will design and implement the professional learning for the advanced course. During the study, you will be asked to participate in two focus groups, each being about 45-60 minutes totaling 90 – 120 minutes. You will also be asked to participate in monthly meetings to discuss data and the next steps. Each meeting is projected to be around 45-60 minutes totaling 3-4 hours. The focus groups will be held via Zoom to ensure that all thoughts shared are captured. Lastly, you will also be asked to facilitate the professional learning for this study, which is four sessions in total, each session being two hours long for a total of eight hours. Your total time for participation in the study would be 12.5 – 14 hours.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your role in the district office.

This course is centered on culturally responsiveness, meaning the learning focuses on equitable learning for all students. There is a small risk that discussions could make you feel sad or experience discomfort. To decrease psychological risks, the researcher will use community

norms/agreements to be used during the ARDT time together. If there are questions during the focus group that make you uncomfortable, you may choose to skip them.

Although measures will be taken to protect your privacy, there is a small risk that some of your information could be accidentally disclosed. To reduce this risk, pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant and their perspective schools. In addition, all information gathered during this study will be kept on a secure device that is password protected. Due to the study involving data collection via a focus group, please note that protection of confidentiality may be limited. To combat this risk, the researcher will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential and that it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future. Additionally, I will only keep information that could identify you long enough to gather your feedback or insights. I do not plan to share this information with anyone who is not connected to this research study. Your information will not be used or distributed for future research.

By participating in this study, your perspectives and insight may help us to improve local school and even district-facilitated professional learning centered on equity and responsiveness. Based on the results of this study, the school CRP leadership team will have an increased awareness of participants' needs when designing and implementing a transformative learning opportunity leading to an increase in one's cultural competence.

Please note that incentives will not be provided for participating in this study.

Please feel free to ask any questions about this research at any time by contacting Shavaun Mincey at 404-802-8350 or at Shavaun.mincey@apsk12.org . If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Warm regards,
Shavaun Mincey

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Letter – Action Research Implementation Team

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN CULTURALLY RESPONSIVENESS SERIES

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: Shavaun Mincey

University of Georgia, Department of Lifelong Education,
Administration, and Policy

This research study seeks to determine the teaching techniques that foster a culturally responsive professional learning series and the perspectives of the educators. You are being invited to be in this study because you are an educator directly involved in the facilitation of the Culturally Responsive practices. You are being asked to share your perspective implementing culturally responsive practices.

By participating in this study, you will be part of the Action Research Implementation team. The ARIT will implement the professional learning from the choice session. During the study, you will be asked to participate in two focus groups, each being about 45-60 minutes totaling 90 – 120 minutes. You will also be asked to participate in monthly meetings to teaching techniques implementation and the next steps. Each meeting is projected to be around 45-60 minutes totaling 3-4 hours. The focus groups will be held via Zoom to ensure that all thoughts shared are captured. Your total time for participation in the study would be 12.5 – 14 hours.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your role in the district office.

This course is centered on culturally responsiveness, meaning the learning focuses on equitable learning for all students. There is a small risk that discussions could make you feel sad or experience discomfort. To decrease psychological risks, the researcher will use community norms/agreements to be used during the ARIT time together. If there are questions during the focus group that make you uncomfortable, you may choose to skip them.

Although measures will be taken to protect your privacy, there is a small risk that some of your information could be accidentally disclosed. To reduce this risk, pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant and their perspective schools. In addition, all information gathered during this study will be kept on a secure device that is password protected. Due to the study involving data collection via a focus group, please note that protection of confidentiality may be limited. To combat this risk, the researcher will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential and that it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future. Additionally, I will only keep information that could identify you long enough to gather your feedback or insights. I do not plan to share this information with anyone who is not connected to this research study. Your information will not be used or distributed for future research.

By participating in this study, your perspectives and insight may help us to improve our school. Based on the results of this study, the school CRP leadership team will have an increased awareness of participants' needs when designing and implementing a transformative learning opportunity leading to an increase in one's cultural competence.

Please note that incentives will not be provided for participating in this study.

Please feel free to ask any questions about this research at any time by contacting Shavaun Mincey at Shavaun.mincey@uga.edu . If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Warm regards,

Shavaun Mincey

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

APPENDIX C

Action Research Implementation Team Post Cycle Reflective Questionnaire

Reflective Questions

Q1 What technique did you implement? (RQ1)

Q2 How did your audience receive it? (RQ1) (RQ3)

Q3 What is your reflection about the implementation? (RQ1) (RQ3)

Q4 How did the technique improve or impact your practice? (RQ1) (RQ3)

APPENDIX D

Action Research Implementation Team Focus Group Protocol #2

Introduction

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this follow-up interview to share your perspectives and experience about how the Culturally Responsiveness professional learning for the course has impacted you as a teacher. I am going to ask you some questions about your experience in the course, focusing on what learned and implemented in your classroom. As I shared before, this study does not aim to evaluate your techniques or experiences. Rather, I am trying to learn more about the implementation of equity professional learning courses offered by the district and district leader practices that help improve the cultural competence of staff members at the local school. Please know that the data collected during this interview is for the sole purpose of my action research study.

Please feel free to ask me to repeat any questions if needed. I may ask follow-up questions to ensure I capture as much of your thinking as possible. Please know that I want you to be open and honest in sharing your opinions and perspectives during the interview.

Your responses are confidential, and your identity will be protected throughout the study.

Any questions before I begin?

Great, let's start.

1. How has this course impacted your culturally responsive practice? (RQ1, RQ3)
2. Think about the strategies you're implemented thus far. Please provide one or more examples of how these strategies impacted student outcomes. (RQ1, RQ3)
3. How did the design of this PD help you to become culturally responsive educators? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
4. What support from your facilitators helped you to implement your learning? (RQ2)
5. In your perception is it beneficial for an educator to be culturally responsive explain why (RQ2)
6. Is there anything else you would like to add? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

Note: Follow-up questions may be asked as needed.

APPENDIX E

Action Research Design Team Post Planning Focus Group Protocol #1

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group to share your perspectives and experience about how the Culturally Responsiveness professional learning for the course is being designed and implemented. I am going to ask you some questions about your experience designing and facilitating the course, focusing on what you have done as leaders to ensure a transformational learning experience for participants, in addition to ensuring teachers feel supported. Please know that the data collected during this interview is for the sole purpose of my action research study.

Please feel free to ask me to repeat any questions if needed. I may ask follow-up questions to ensure I capture as much of your thinking as possible. Please know that I want you to be open and honest in sharing your opinions and perspectives during the interview.

Your responses are confidential, and your identity will be protected throughout the study.

Any questions before I begin?

Great, let's start.

1. What strategies do you feel have been successful in supporting teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development? Why? (RQ1, (RQ2)
2. Are there any other strategies we should incorporate to ensure teacher implementation? Why? (RQ2)
3. What design elements have we been intentional with in building this course? (RQ3)
4. What facilitation moves do you feel have impacted our participants the most? (RQ3)
5. Is there anything else that you would like to add? (RQ3)

Note: Follow-up questions may be asked as needed.

APPENDIX F

(Survey completed school-wide in November 2024)

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) Self-Assessment and Reflective Conversations

The purpose of this document is to be a window into our progress and practice as culturally responsive and competent educators. The self-assessment and reflective conversations are designed to inspire inward reflection, both independently and with a peer, in order to improve equitable and high-achievement outcomes for our schools, classrooms, and students.

- This CRCT self-assessment and reflection tool focuses on 4 components of Domain 5:
 - *5a—Recognizing the Educational Impact of Cultural Diversity*
 - *5b—Addressing Demographic Inequities in Achievement*
 - *5c—Building Relationships across Cultural Differences*
 - *5d—Adapting Curriculum to Reflect Cultural Diversity*

CRP Self-assessment Instructions

1. You may use the prompts in this tool in ***any way*** that supports your own reflection and growth. This includes for example—journaling to one or more of the reflection questions, completing the indicators of effectiveness rubrics or some combination of both.
 - Rubric Guidance for Indicators of Effectiveness:
 - **Beginning-** This is a new concept or facet of my professional practice.
 - **Developing-** I consider myself to need more experience or learning within this indicator of effectiveness, there is ample room for professional growth for me.
 - **Proficient-** I consistently and systematically attend to this indicator of effectiveness within my professional practice. I continuously seek professional development and new strategies to improve my practice within this indicator of effectiveness.
 - **Exemplary-** While I am always improving, I have significant experience and learning and I consistently and systematically attend to this indicator of effectiveness within my professional practice. I am reflective about my beliefs, actions and impact, and I adapt my practice to meet student needs. I am willing to serve as an example or mentor for my peers on how to professionally implement this indicator of

effectiveness.

2. Using your CRP self-assessment, have a reflective discussion with an instructional coach, colleague or PLC team member.
3. Discuss your strengths, areas for growth, curricular, instructional and pedagogical adaptations you could make.

5a: Recognizing the Educational Impact of Cultural Diversity

Culturally competent educators recognize the relationship between culture and learning; they continually reflect upon their own cultural experience and the experiences of their students; and they consistently use this knowledge to create learning environments that support students' diverse learning needs.

Self-Assessment:

B-Beginning, D-Developing, P-Proficient, E-Exemplary

Indicators of Effectiveness		B	D	P	E	Examples/Questions
Awareness of Own Culture	I have an understanding of my own cultural background and how that influences my practice					
	I recognize and can articulate the educational impact of culture.					
	I continuously seek professional development opportunities to explore my own and others' cultures.					
Knowledge of Students' Cultures	I create a welcoming learning environment that reflects the cultural backgrounds of my students.					
	I recognize and intervene on my own and others' predisposed expectations about student ability and performance.					
Patterns of Cultural Interaction	I use various strategies to present information to students based on my knowledge of students' learning and participation styles.					
	I consistently and effectively use instructional strategies that build on students' cultural strengths and promote success.					
	I create opportunities for students to reflect on their cultural background and share with each other.					

Reflection Questions:

1. How have you/do you become aware of the cultural backgrounds of your students?
2. How does your awareness of the cultural backgrounds of your students impact/inform your practice on a daily basis?
3. How does your awareness of your own cultural identity impact your instruction and your relationship with your students?
4. What patterns do you observe in the cultural values and norms of your practice? How could you expand the cultural patterns to support the engagement and academic success of more students?

5b: Addressing Demographic Inequities in Achievement

Data on students' progress is gathered and used regularly; it provides essential information for designing and differentiating classroom instruction. Disaggregating student data by demographic groups provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their individual instructional practices as well as institutional policies, practices, and programs that may perpetuate inequities in achievement.

Self-Assessment:

B-Beginning, D-Developing, P-Proficient, E-Exemplary

Indicators of Effectiveness		B	D	P	E	Examples/Questions
Knowledge and use of achievement data across demographic groups to inform instructional practice	I regularly look at student demographic achievement outcomes and discipline referral data to detect inequitable patterns in my classroom.					
	I research or design teaching and classroom management strategies that reduce inequitable disparities I notice in achievement and discipline patterns in my classroom.					
	I seek out and analyze data on students' prior academic progress to inform and differentiate instruction.					
	I team with other teachers to review student work, make collaborative decisions about academic performance expectations, and consistently apply these expectations for all students.					

Differentiated instruction	I hold and consistently communicate high expectations for all students. demonstrates, through classroom practices, a commitment to teaching all students					
	I demonstrate, through classroom practice, a commitment to teaching all students.					
	I get to know each individual student in order to determine their skill level and learning needs.					
	I assess student progress frequently and design instruction accordingly.					
	I identify and access resources outside the classroom to provide supplemental learning opportunities to meet students' need.					
	I recognize that students may not have learned grade-level skills as expected so I provide supplemental experiences to accelerate learning.					

Reflection Questions:

1. How do you gather data relevant to demographic inequities in your classroom?
2. What patterns do you observe about the demographic achievement or discipline patterns in your classroom?
3. How do you incorporate this data as you ensure that you are holding students to the same rigorous standards while also differentiating instruction?

5c: Building Relationships across Cultural Differences

Teaching and learning are fundamentally relational activities. Culturally competent educators create learning environments that are characterized by caring relationships, high expectations, and a diversity of instructional methods that respond to the learning needs of all students.

Culturally competent educators also build strong relationships with families to support student success.

Self-Assessment:

B-Beginning, D-Developing, P-Proficient, E-Exemplary

Indicators of Effectiveness		B	D	P	E	Examples/Questions
Culturally responsive learning spaces, relationships & expectations	I get to know each individual student in order to determine their skill level and learning needs.					
	I regularly communicate to every student, in various ways, my belief in their ability to achieve.					
	I design and adapt my classroom management approach to meet the needs of students and to support relationships with and among students.					
Effective communications with diverse groups of parents	I understand the importance of home/school partnerships in the learning process and actively seek to build strong relationships with students' families.					
	I seek to learn about the family culture and values of my students in order to build relationships that support learning.					
Effective use of communication support resources	I regularly seek to engage and communicate effectively with families through a variety of means and methods.					

Reflection Questions:

1. How do you work to build cross-cultural relationships with, among, and between your students?
2. What do you do to enhance communication and partnerships with families? How do these actions incorporate the culture and values of each family?
3. What patterns do you notice in your relationship building with students and families?

5d: Adapting Curriculum to Reflect Cultural Diversity

Culturally competent teachers ensure that their students are provided with an academically challenging curriculum that includes the contributions and perspectives of the variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups that make up our society, and they consistently link the curriculum to the personal cultural resources that their students bring to school. Culturally competent

teacher do not assume that because the curriculum works for some, even most, learners, it is adequate for all learners. They are attuned to the curricular needs of all students and they prepare instructional materials that provide equitable learning opportunities.

Self-Assessment:

B-Beginning, D-Developing, P-Proficient, E-Exemplary

Indicators of Effectiveness		B	D	P	E	Examples/Questions
Multicultural content integration and multiple perspectives	I can recognize and articulate cultural biases present in the explicit and implicit curricula.					
	I create opportunities for students to bring their life experiences, cultures, and languages into the classroom as a foundation for learning.					
	I integrate a variety of assessments into the curriculum so that students can demonstrate their individual knowledge, talents, and skills; activating student strengths and amplifying student voice.					
	I present the curriculum so that students understand historical and contemporary events and issues from the perspectives of various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.					
	In my classroom, teaching and learning uses examples and analogies from students' lives and applies content and skills to students' lives.					
Physical classroom environment	I create a classroom that is accessible and welcoming to all of my students.					
	My classroom environment reflects a diversity of cultures, interests, and student experiences.					

Reflection Questions:

1. What are you doing to embed a variety of cultural perspectives and values into your curriculum and classroom environment?
2. How do you embed student culture, experiences, interests, and expertise into teaching and learning?
3. How have you shifted your instructional practices to meet the variety of cultural values and learning styles of your students?