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# Enhancing Student Engagement Through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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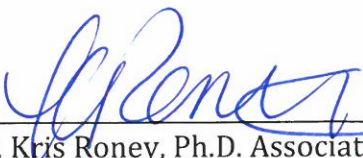
Enhancing Student Engagement Through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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**Abstract**

A significant achievement gap between students of the majority White culture and those of historically disenfranchised cultures in the United States of America still persists, though policy changes and laws have worked to mitigate the effects of marginalization. Examining inequities in the classroom and tools for closing the achievement gap as well as creating educational experiences beneficial and equitable for all students continues to be a salient area of study and research. This study implemented three strategies drawn from the theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and documented student engagement as related to the implementation of these strategies to find out what specific tools and techniques teachers can use in their classrooms to engage traditionally underachieving and disengaged students.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

The United States of America is a diverse country, with hundreds of different languages spoken by people of many different races, religions and nationalities making up the overall population. This breadth of diversity is found in schools as well; where classrooms in many places are made up of a majority non-White population (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). In our modern and increasingly diverse society and culture, the growing racial achievement gap is growing disproportionately in education today, with most minority groups remaining at the bottom of the educational spectrum (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2004 & 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995; VerBruggen, 2011). For example, African-American, Latino and other disenfranchised groups have statistically lower graduation rates and state mandated achievement test scores than White students. Research has shown that teaching culturally relevant curriculum in the classroom can assist in closing this gap (Gay, 2004 & 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### Statement of the Problem

Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced the theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, or CRP, which promotes the idea that creating a home culture and school connection can assist in engaging culturally diverse students in the classroom when taught by a sensitive and culturally aware pedagogue. While all students should have an equal opportunity for education in this country, a hidden and embedded racism remains prevalent in our educational systems and needs to be exposed and addressed (Young, 2010).

The theories and practical applications of CRP have changed and evolved over the past thirty years; in 2014 Ladson-Billings revised the theory of CRP to fit the evolving

populations and changing educational landscape. The revised theory has been renamed Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014). While Ladson-Billings (2014) has encouraged other scholars to expand on her original theory of CRP, she reviewed the scholarship that continued her work over the last two decades and found some stagnant areas of scholarship that she proposes to revise with Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). The new theory builds on the previous incarnation, but focuses less on a single culture, African-American students, and proposes that a more multicultural perspective be adopted by teachers to include the Latino, Asian, African-American and students from other cultures who make up the student population (Ladson-Billings, 2014). While CSP is the latest incarnation of CRP, this study will continue to use Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as its theoretical basis, as CSP is a very new proposed theory and has not been widely researched or critiqued.

By exploring the tenets of CRP and its applications in the classroom, educators can begin to engage students from these disenfranchised groups and can increase academic achievement and graduation rates. The first step is to create a curriculum that explores and celebrates minority cultures, languages and history. This curriculum must go beyond stereotypical and common cultural standards- i.e. such as only celebrating African-American culture during the assigned month or only addressing minority cultures through celebrations of holidays such as Cinco de Mayo (Ladson-Billings, 1995 & 2014). The next step is for educators to examine what it means to be culturally sensitive and relevant. How can they create an environment where students feel valued, safe and respected and therefore want to engage and take responsibility for their own learning experience? There continues to be a need to develop cogent practical strategies that

teachers can use systematically to inform their practice, impact student engagement and create a proactive positive classroom environment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Over the past sixty years, research conducted on the topic of closing the achievement gap has gained momentum. Teachers and administrators are beginning to focus on finding ways for all students to achieve academic success, regardless of cultural or racial background. One method of including all students in this academic success is to create curriculum that reflects their cultural heritage and incorporates their prior cultural knowledge that students bring from home (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2010). The general population in America is changing rapidly and minority populations in schools are growing, to the point where they are often more numerous than the White, majority population (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). As school populations grow increasingly multicultural and multilingual, the achievement gap continues to widen and increased focus on connecting disenfranchised students to the curriculum is imperative in order to close it.

There are many theories that form the foundation for research on the topic of Multicultural Education: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Latino Critical Theory (Bernal, 2002) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) being the major theories used in this proposed research. With all of these theoretical foundations in the literature, there becomes a need for more basic, hands-on research, such as this study, to determine ways in which all teachers, regardless of classroom level or subject, can increase engagement and academic success of their students. However, putting major theories like Critical

Race Theory and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into practice in everyday classroom procedures can be difficult for teachers without specific training (Young, 2010).

Small-scale studies can help teachers without specific training in CRP and CRT to find basic techniques and tools that they can put into practice in their own classrooms. Knowing how to infuse state-mandated curriculum with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, that can assist in engaging culturally disenfranchised students, while still teaching much needed foundational knowledge and subjects, is necessary for all teachers of multicultural students. The final step that is necessary in conducting CRP is to develop the skill in students to critique the existing social order and begin to move towards changing the educational system that is subtly excluding and disenfranchising them (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

This study will identify ways in which teachers can integrate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into their classroom curriculum and personal teaching styles through the examination of three strategies used in classroom and curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These three strategies are:

1. Infusing the curriculum with cultural references and perspectives.
2. Creating a classroom environment where students are able to use their background and cultural knowledge as a basis for their education and create a trusting environment where students and teachers learn from each other.
3. Make social justice a focus of the curriculum guiding students to look for, evaluate and create social justice in their lives and their education.

By examining CRT and CRP and putting those theories into practice in the classroom, educators will discover how they can effectively teach culturally sensitive lessons in ways that reach and include all students. In this era of increasing immigration and necessary cultural inclusiveness, every teacher could benefit by implementing some of the techniques discussed in this study. The focus is on attainable classroom tools and models that every educator could adapt to their own personal classroom environment to create equitable and higher educational opportunities for all students.

### **Research Questions**

1. Which aspect of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are students responding to based on the use of three strategies?
2. How does integrating these strategies of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into my teaching make me a more effective pedagogue for multicultural students?

### **Theoretical Framework**

There are two main theories that modern researchers rely on to support their exploration of racial inequalities in the American school system and the continually expanding achievement gap: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). There are many prominent researchers in this field, but a few academics have laid the groundwork on which most of this research is based. Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2004 & 2013) are two standouts in this field that will be analyzed as part of the theoretical framework for this study. CRT and CRP are not the oldest theories that look at race and educational inequalities, but they are the most relevant for much of the research being conducted now. Ladson-Billings has proposed a “Remix”, or reinterpretation of, her original theory of CRP, rechristened Culturally

Sustaining Pedagogy (2014). While this theory will be referenced in this study, CRP will remain the primary theoretical underpinning for the research conducted.

There are two other theories that were used as part of the theoretical framework for this study, they are considered secondary frameworks and will be referenced throughout the literature review, but are not considered the main theories used in the proposed research. These theories are: Funds of Knowledge (Moll, Amanti et.al, 1992 & Zipin, 2009) and Latino Critical Theory (Bernal, 2002). Funds of Knowledge (FoK) emphasizes the importance of accessing students home community and cultural knowledge in the classroom to both validate their cultural experience and enhance engagement and understanding of curriculum through prior experience (Moll, Amanti et.al., 1992). When exploring FoK in pedagogy, Zipin (2009) sees making connections between the learners' lives beyond school and curriculum as a "Justice-oriented strategy" that promotes equity in education. Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) uses both CRP and CRT to promote the idea that examining these theories in relation to a Latino based perspective can create guidelines towards finding equity in education in the Southern United States where Latino students are most prevalent (Bernal, 2002).

Ladson-Billings (1995) laid the framework for using Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theory originally used to address racism in the legal field, to address problems in education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). CRT provides a framework in which to consider racism in education as it relates to property rights and legal literature. These concepts show how the right for an equitable education is not necessarily given to all of America's students, the inherent "property value of Whiteness" is not often discussed, but is assumed to be true according to CRT (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). One of the lasting



legacies of the landmark Civil Rights case *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1956) is that the integration of African-American students into public schools was used as a way to cover up racism in America; it was never actually an effective method for ending racism and inequalities in schools. By acknowledging the assumed rights of Whiteness, and the deficit of the rights for African-Americans, CRT can begin to examine ways in which inequalities in education for minorities exist and researchers can begin to look for ways to create equal opportunities in the academic world (Bernal, 2002).

Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. This theory approached educational pedagogy through a culturally focused lens. CRP focused on teacher attitudes, lessons and their behavior towards students of color in the classroom and how those aspects can positively affect disenfranchised students. Ladson-Billings' (1995) original focus was primarily on African-American students, but her work has also been applied to address the educational inequities amongst other minority groups as well. The revised theory of CRP, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, focuses on classrooms that are distinctly multicultural, with many minority groups, and how teachers can effectively engage and include all of these cultures at the same time (Ladson-Billings, 2014). One of the central tenets of CRP is to strengthen student's connections with their home culture while focusing on academic achievement. CRP pushes teachers to strive to create social change and encourage their students to work towards a better future for themselves, their communities and their culture's connection to the dominant White culture (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995 & 2014).

Together Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, Funds of Knowledge and Latino Critical Race Theory can be

combined to create a solid framework with which to approach solving the inherent issues of underachievement and student disengagement of multicultural students in the classroom. While they approach this issue from different perspectives, these theories have several key themes in common: social activism and a push for radical change, warning against colorblindness and racial neutrality as perpetrators of hidden racisms, and a belief that racism is endemic to American society and to education (Bernal, 2002; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995 & 2014; Moll, Amanti et.al, 1992; Zipin, 2009).

This study utilized these theories to create a solid grounding in Multicultural Educational Research. This framework was used to conduct research in a classroom setting with mostly Latino students, who have a high rate of academic failure and student disconnect within the classroom. The community focused on is a low income, high minority population, and the ideas represented by CRT on the property value of whiteness are reflected in the everyday life of these students. By conducting CRP in the classroom the goal is to create a classroom environment where students begin to take pride in their communities, cultural background and academic achievements (Ladson-Billings, 1995); while using CRT to examine how and why the achievement gap persists (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

### **Researcher Background**

I grew up in a small, white town in rural Washington State. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher and as soon as I graduated high school I moved to Portland, Oregon to study education and history at the University of Portland. My interest in multicultural education and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy began almost as soon as I

started the teaching program at the University of Portland. I was placed to assist in local high school classes the first week of school, and quickly began to see the diversity of students in this urban setting. My little rural hometown was around 85% white, and the few students of different backgrounds that I interacted with were mostly adopted into White families. Once I began working with African-American, Latino and other minority students, I was immediately intrigued with the cultural differences and was inspired to learn more about how this aspect of education.

Two specific teaching placements inspired me to continue my studies into CRP and multicultural education. The first was a placement as a mentor and tutor in an afterschool program called the Perspectives Gentleman's Club. This club was created to help African-American high school aged boys succeed on a higher level both academically and socially than many of their peers. At that time Portland had an almost 50% high school dropout rate for African-American boys, and this club was sponsored as a way to keep them in school and working towards a college education. I was given a group of ten boys to mentor and teach during an evening meeting each week, over a period of an entire school year. Working and communicating on a very open level with black youths was eye opening for me and made me want to learn more about working with this demographic.

The second placement was during my student teaching year, during which I was given the task of teaching African-American history. My students were primarily African-American and they were not very open at first to having a young, white, female teacher. It was the biggest challenge of my life, and I learned more during those months than I ever have again. Without knowing the principles of CRP and CRT, I had to

navigate my way to a trusting relationship with these students, and get our class moving forward on a platform of learning, social justice and inquiry. These students were eventually receptive of my Whiteness and we learned a lot together about American history, clash of cultures and mutual trust.

As I moved to California to pursue my Masters degree, the main “minority” demographic changed from African-American students to Latino students, and while my focus has not changed away from CRP and multicultural education, I’ve had to learn new methods of approaching students and creating that environment of co-learning and mutual trust. This action research is the natural progression of my decade old search for educational equity and cultural acceptance.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Academic Achievement:** The outcome of attaining one’s academic goals.

**Achievement Gap:** The observed disparity between the academic performances of groups of students, particularly when the groups differ by socioeconomic status or racial and cultural background.

**Colorblindness:** With reference to a person who claims that they don’t see race or cultural differences in people.

**Critical Race Theory:** A critical examination of race, law, education and power in society.

**Culturally Disenfranchised:** Belonging to a minority culture whose worth is not recognized by society.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:** An educational theory proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995) that seeks to create more equitable educational opportunities for students of disenfranchised cultures.

Cultural Sensitivity: A set of skills that allows a person to interact and get to know a person from a cultural group that is different from their own, a skill to engage deeper with people of many cultures and backgrounds.

Funds of Knowledge: The accumulated cultural and social knowledge by an individual drawn from their personal experiences, background and cultural knowledge.

Pedagogy: The method and practice of teaching.

Pedagogue: One who engages in pedagogy; an educator or teacher.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

In this modern era of growing immigration and diversity in America, racial inequality and the growing achievement gap between students from the White dominant culture and those of minority (non-White) cultures is an area of deep concern (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). The achievement gap has been a growing problem since the nationwide school integration of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954 (Gay, 2004) put racial inequalities in education into the national spotlight. Today's classrooms are a diverse mix of cultures and languages. Many researchers and scholars argue that schools should be shifting how they educate students to include perspectives that are not always addressed in curriculum, in-class, and in student-teacher interactions (Gay, 2013). Ladson-Billings (1995 & 2014), Gay (2004 & 2013), and Howard (2001 & 2003) are among the many academics that have conducted research on this issue over the past two decades.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is a theory developed by Ladson-Billings (1995) that proposed a framework for educating students of diverse backgrounds to create equitable schools and academic achievement in students who historically have fallen behind. Ladson-Billing's original theory was modeled for African-American students, but has been expanded over the last two decades to apply to students of all diverse backgrounds (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2014). However, many scholars warn against lumping all ethnically diverse students into one category (Gay, 2013; Sparks, 2000). The needs, experiences and home-community knowledge differ dramatically for students of varying cultures. Implementation of CRP proposed to do

three things: promote academic achievement in all students, produce students who are culturally competent in both the majority (White) culture and their home culture, and produce students who can critique the existing social order and who work to promote change within the system (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

This review will first explore the historical background of this issue, tracing the evolution of CRP from the 1954 *Brown v. The Board of Education* Supreme Court decision to the modern era. From there, current research will be examined through the lenses of four themes that are reflected in the principles of CRP: identity and achievement, equity and excellence, teaching the whole child and student-teacher relationships (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). The purpose of this review is to identify practical theories and applications of CRP that can be applied in schools throughout the country to enhance student engagement and begin the process of closing the achievement gap. The overall goal of implementing these theories in education is to begin healing the fractured education system to create a safe and equitable learning experience for all students.

### **Beyond *Brown*, a Historical Evolution of CRP**

The issue of the achievement gap has been in the public eye since *Brown vs. The Board of Education* first integrated schools in 1954. Gay (2004) traced the historical evolution of integration, the achievement gap and multicultural education. According to Gay (2004), the journey towards equal education began with the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. In the half century since that case was judged, equal education has not been achieved (Patterson, 2006). Despite integration, the inequality of education is still apparent and the achievement gap nowhere near closed.

Gay (2004) argued that although the decision of the court was a huge step towards ending these educational problems, merely ending physical separation was not enough to bring African-American students to an equal playing field.

The first major hurdle to African-American students success, post integration, was that African-American students were expected to learn, act and think like White students. In addition to the lack of supportive programs to help African-American students succeed, integration mostly moved African-American students to White schools, with little reciprocation. White students were able to continue with the education that they were familiar with, and did not have to make such massive educational changes (Patterson, 2006). No changes in curriculum or teaching styles were made to accommodate African-American students, and as a result of having their entire educational system changed overnight, they began to fall behind (Gay, 2004; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). One early attempt to remedy this achievement gap was placing African-American students, who weren't thriving, in White schools to work with achievement oriented White students. This method did not result in much success, as no emphasis was put on modifying instruction for the African-American students or helping them catch up in classes they were unfamiliar with (Patterson, 2006).

Although *Brown* (1954) began the process of positive change for African-Americans in schools, the court decision was one of policy. Therefore, the day-to-day activities and curriculum at many schools remained overtly racist and the basic content taught was not changed to incorporate the minority students (Patterson, 2006). In addition to this, many school administrators and local policy makers refused to comply with integration policies, which created more hurdles for African-American students to



attend White schools and succeed in the classroom (Patterson, 2006). Even when schools attempted to comply with integration laws, often the White public outcry was so intense that schools reversed the process of integration. Patterson (2006) illustrated an example of this with Milford High School, in Delaware, where the public managed to shut down the school to protest integration by keeping their White students home from school when the school admitted eleven African-American students. The school did not graduate an African-American student until 1965, a decade after they first attempted to integrate (Patterson, 2006).

The idea that incorporating multicultural curriculum as a method of engaging students of all races was not brought to light until the late 1960s (Gay, 2004). This concept was the precursor to CRP, although that term would not be coined until 1995 (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In the 1960s, in the realm of multicultural education, the attention was turned from the courtroom to what was actually being taught in the classroom (Patterson, 2006). Curriculum taught in public schools was almost entirely devoid of cultural references other than that of the White, dominant culture. What references there were to other cultures was often stereotypical and portrayed through a negative perspective. Activists fought for inclusion of positive multicultural content (Gay, 2004). Then, as now, researchers found that this positive inclusion of cultural content helped students to identify with the curriculum, raising their self-image and improving academic achievement (Gay, 1990).

Although African-American civil rights groups began the fight for integration and equality in schools, other minority groups, namely Latino, Native American and Asian-American, emerged during this time to also fight for inclusion of their culture and

students in the classroom (Patterson, 2006). Although originally all of the groups fought separately for inclusion, that lasted only a short time before the focus turned to multicultural education (Gay, 2004). As textbooks and curriculum came to include more positive cultural references, the fight for educational equity narrowed down to less obvious exclusions and focused more on subtle racism, such as tracking programs (Patterson, 2006). Teacher preparation and cultural sensitivity have become the most modern incarnation of the quest for multicultural education (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). By the 1990s, with the introduction of Ladson-Billings and other scholars to the field, the attention turned to teacher preparation programs and the behaviors and attitudes of Culturally Relevant Pedagogues, in addition to including multicultural curriculum (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Gay (2004) argued that multicultural education “has the transformative potential to genuinely desegregate the educational process and to fulfill the vision of equality that the *Brown* decision and other school policies promise.” Although Gay (2004) believed that the vision has not yet been realized, she maintained that the path to educational equality is through multicultural education and well-prepared culturally sensitive educators. The field of CRP is continually growing and evolving, and remains a multifaceted area of research. As the American population and demographic shifts and changes (for example African-Americans were once the most numerous minority group but the growth of the Latino population has eclipsed them) the field of multicultural education will change and adapt to meet those needs (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

### **Identity and Achievement**

Nearly all of the literature on CRP touches on the importance of acknowledging and examining identity, both of the student and the teacher (Bernal, 2002; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2013; Garza, 2008; Howard, 2001). Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) define identity as a social construct framed by the way in which persons perceive, believe, relate to and evaluate the world around them. Identity is a central tenet in education; students are expected to explore who they are and how they relate to the world around them in almost every single academic subject. Teacher identity is also an important component to creating a culturally relevant and respectful classroom (Ladson-Billing, 1995). Teachers should examine their own identities and explore their unintentional or intentional biases before they can understand and teach the multicultural population in their classrooms. Both student and teacher must examine their own identities in order to validate the home-culture of students and their personal experiences and lead to improved academic achievement (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) found that “by embracing the reality of diversity through such an identification [Culturally Relevant Pedagogue] is critical in creating an environment for equitable learning.”

A classroom can include a myriad of different groups, identities, races, economic classes and diversities. Teachers cannot expect his or her sole cultural perspective to deliver to and engage all students in the classroom. The term “culture” used here includes ethnicity and race as well as gender, class, language, region, religion, sexual identity, exceptionality and other diversities (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Each student belongs to several different cultural groups and therefore has unique insight and

perspective on the world and on education. To address this, a Culturally Relevant Pedagogue must create an environment in which home-community cultures are embraced positively and students should feel that they are safe to contribute their experiences in class (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Identity and achievement also emphasizes that colorblindness or race-neutral policies do not lessen bias in the classroom (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

In fact, ignoring race and culture as a factor in education only perpetuates the hidden racisms that are prevalent throughout the educational system and devalue students' individual cultures and perspectives (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Gay (2013) writes that a common myth in American schools and society is that the United States has become a post-racial society, and therefore race and racism no longer needs to be discussed. Gay (2003) maintains that racism is still persistent in U.S. society and schools and that ignoring it only perpetuates the problem of hidden and embedded racism. Bernal (2002) supports this perspective, in which she argues that, "These frameworks [Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Theory] challenge dominant liberal ideas such as colorblindness and meritocracy and show how these ideas operate to disadvantage people of color and further advantage Whites."

In order to create an environment that promotes and values differences and assists students in maintaining positive cultural identity, Gay (2013) argues that, "Culture and difference are natural attributes of humanity, and therefore, should be normative features of teaching and learning." Rather than embracing the attitude that every student is equal, Gay (2013) argues that educators should embrace their own differences and showcase them as a filter for learning experiences. By learning from each student's own, unique,

cultural voice, the learning environment is made more relevant and effective for all learners. Critical Race Theory (CRT) promotes this idea as well, and endorses incorporating student voice into the learning experience to enhance the home community/school connection (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). The freedom of expressing their own voice in the classroom helps to empower students from disenfranchised cultures who often feel powerless and disconnected in the classroom because their voice does not match the dominant (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) classroom perspective (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2010; Garza, 2008).

Sparks (2000) gave a recommendation of accommodations for Native American students in mainstream classrooms that focused largely on student and teacher identity. He examined a number of studies on Native American students in education and determined that minority groups who are positively oriented towards both their minority culture and the majority culture have a greater chance of academic success. To this end, Sparks (2000) advised teachers to allow their Native students to give feedback on curriculum that they would like to see in the classroom. He cautioned against basing curricular inclusion on a single “Indian reality” and instead urged teachers to make an effort to learn about individual students, to discover their identity both inside and to outside of the classroom and use that knowledge to shape what and how they are taught (Sparks, 2000).

Although Sparks specifically researched Native American students, much of his work can apply to other minority cultures, and studies focused on African-American and Latino students found similar results (Sparks, 2000; Garza, 2008; Howard, 2001). In a study conducted in a high school ESL classroom, Wortham and Contreras (2002) found

that by creating a space that incorporates some characteristics of the Latino home community found in a small New England town, students felt more comfortable asking for help on academic work and were able to express themselves ethnically and project their cultural knowledge into academic success. Contreras made an effort to create a classroom that emulated the community oriented and multi-tasking environment in many Latino households, with the overall effect that students felt at home in her classroom and did not hold back from asking for help and engaging with the curriculum (Wortham & Contreras, 2002).

Often students from minority backgrounds find themselves stuck in between their home culture and that of the mainstream United States (Bernal, 2002). This situation can be a factor that distinctly limits their academic success, as they do not relate to the curriculum in the way that most White, American born students do. A Culturally Relevant Pedagogue is an educator who is culturally sensitive and who considers three things when planning culturally relevant lessons: academic success, cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Young, 2010). These culturally sensitive educators expect a high level of academic success from all their students regardless of race, and are prepared to do whatever it takes in order to see all the students succeed.

Educators must not only get to know the learners in their classrooms as individuals, but they must come to understand something about their backgrounds and then examine their own (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). By exploring the identities of teacher and student, they can find ways to connect their students to the curriculum and to themselves. Young (2010) conducted a small-scale study on educators at an elementary

school in the northeastern United States that examined the implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the classroom. Young (2010) discovered that one of the challenges for teaching multicultural students is that teachers often lack a basic understanding of their own unintentional biases, and therefore have a difficult time approaching race and racism in the classroom.

Young (2010) also concluded that educators must be more knowledgeable about race, racism and their own identity in order to implement CRP in their own practices. Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote that CRP included the necessary step of raising the issues of race and racism with students, to prepare students to question the injustices and racism that exist in society and in schools. This increased awareness is a difficult step for many teachers to take; especially those who are a different race than their students. Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2010) conducted a study to find out the preferences of African-American students towards Culturally Relevant lessons. In their series of African-American studies courses, they taught a lesson discussing the use of the “N-Word” in society. This was a well-received lesson by the students, and an example of a way to approach the larger issues of race, racism and identity in a culturally sensitive and relevant way. Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2010) found that all students (regardless of race) preferred culturally relevant lessons to those taught without specific focus on culture.

The topic of identity in education is expansive, and as educators prepare to teach in their multicultural classrooms they need to prepare by learning as much as possible about their own identities and that of their students. In order to facilitate student achievement in academics, these topics must be incorporated into the daily pedagogy to

validate all students. According to Garza (2008), in his study on the caring behaviors of educators: “educators must engage in a critical self-analysis to consider how their actions and disposition encourage and hinder student success and achievement. As a consequence, race and ethnicity must be considered in examining the dynamics of caring for students.”

### **Equity and Excellence**

The second major theme examined in this review is that of Equity and Excellence. According to Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011), equity does not mean treating all students equally; instead it means giving each individual child what they need in order to have success in the classroom. Bringing equity into the classroom means that differentiating instruction is essential and that celebrating student’s differences will help to create an atmosphere in the classroom that encourages excellence for all students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Incorporating multicultural curriculum will help students see themselves and their background as valuable to their education. This boost in self-esteem and the connection to their lives will help increase interest and engagement in the classroom. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) argue, “In treating students equitably, teachers accept students through affirmations of their cultural capital.” By recognizing students’ background and cultural knowledge as a positive fund of information, teachers help to give them a sense of investment and importance of their learning process (Bernal, 2002).

Much of the literature on the topic of CRP reflects the importance of incorporating equity into education as a method of creating excellence. Howard (2001) conducted a study in four inner city elementary schools, collecting data from students on their perceptions of CRP. Howard (2001) found that students worked harder and



respected teachers more who had high academic expectations of them regardless of their race. Because of the current achievement gap, and the overall lower academic performance of African-American students, many teachers have a deficit-based approach to teaching African-American students, and students pick up on their lowered expectations and responded by engaging in the negative behavior that teachers are subconsciously expecting (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2010). Howard (2001) maintains that “culturally responsive pedagogy must include a genuine belief by teachers in students’ abilities and a commitment to structure content, instruction and assessment in a manner that refuses to accept anything less than student’s absolute highest potential.”

Supporting Howard’s conclusions, Garza (2008), in his explorations on perceptions of caring behaviors, found that Latino and African-American students “perceived [the teacher] providing academic support as critical in demonstrating care.” Students in his study identified academic scaffolding and support in the classroom as behaviors that both demonstrated caring by the teacher and facilitated success and the building of self-esteem in the learners (Garza, 2008). By providing individual students with the help that they need, teachers are showing that they believe that the student is capable of success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, by providing the scaffolding to all students during a normal class session, it removed the embarrassment and stigma that accompanied students being singled out or having to come in after school for help. When the teachers focus is on success for all rather than task completion with a “one-strike you’re out” approach, teachers demonstrate equity and caring to their students (Garza, 2008).

Another example came from Houchen (2012) who conducted a small-scale study in her remedial reading class in Florida. She found that students in her multi-grade (9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>) class translated their failure on the Florida State Standardized Reading tests into personal failure, damaged their self-esteem and their view of their position in school society. Disproportionate numbers of African-American students fail this reading test and are tracked into remedial reading courses until they pass. Houchen (2012) found that by implementing culturally relevant curriculum and reading materials in the classroom she was able to engage students in the coursework. Through reflective writing and classroom discussions she worked with the students, and at the end of the year her students had a higher pass rate on the re-take exam than the state average. Houchen (2012) concluded that by implementing CRP and by addressing the issue of race in standardized test results with her students, she was able to reverse some of the stigma associated with failing the exam and help more students to pass the next one that they took.

As Houchen (2012) discovered, celebrating the student's culture and diversity within the curriculum helps to engage and excite them about learning, this can lead to increased academic success. The standard curriculum taught in schools only vaguely includes cultures other than the mainstream, and it is not surprising that students are left with a feeling of inequity or exclusion in the classroom. Many scholars examine this issue through the theory of Funds of Knowledge (FoK), which maintains that students are the holders of home-community knowledge which can be used in the classroom to enrich and deepen curriculum and can be an asset to all students, including those of the majority White culture (Bernal, 2002; Moll, Amanti, Neffe, et. al., 1992; Zipin, 2009). Zipin

(2009) believed that school learners who see a mismatch between their culturally inherited ways of knowing and that which is valued and taught in the classroom are less likely to believe that their knowledge and intelligence is worthwhile. Bernal (2002) supports this statement, and believes that by re-conceptualizing Latino FoK and seeing them as an asset in the classroom, Latinos will see themselves as active and positive partners in learning, and will further engage themselves in the educational process.

By incorporating CRP and utilizing FoK in the classroom, more students will be connected with the curriculum, and therefore will be able to achieve academic excellence at a rate equal to those of the majority culture in America. Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2010) took this idea of the inherent right to learn and elaborated on it: “working in conjunction with the consumers of education- our children- can result in highly relevant and culturally responsive approaches that resonate with and validate the life of the African American child.” The curriculum in schools should reflect the students who are to learn to it; by creating a curriculum that reflects all students a higher rate of equity and excellence should result.

### **Teaching the Whole Child**

The third theme examined in this review is teaching the whole child, i.e. seeing the child as a product of family, community and culture, not just as a student inside the classroom. Teachers need to look beyond how they perceive the students in school and consider the ways in which their development was shaped (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Some questions that should be asked by educators are (Ladson-Billings, 1995): What was the environment that produced this child? What cultural knowledge do they bring to the classroom? What languages and experiences shaped who they are, and how

can those be accessed and validated in the classroom? In addition to learning about their background of the students, culturally relevant pedagogues emphasize the FoK or “cultural capital” that students bring to the classroom and scaffold curriculum around it (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Moll, Amanti et.al, 1992). By allowing children to use and access all of their pre-knowledge and ways of learning in the classroom the educator is emphasizing academic achievement.

Brozo, Valerio and Salazar (1996) illustrated the benefits of incorporating home-community knowledge and resources in the classroom, in a study conducted in a mostly Latino Junior High School in Corpus Christi, Texas. The results of this study revealed that utilizing culturally relevant literature, curriculum and home-community connections to teach reading and writing to disadvantaged youth gave them a better opportunity to engage with the curriculum and helped advance their writing skills. Brozo, Valerio and Salazar (1996) conducted this yearlong study cooperatively. They used local community resources to link student’s lives to literature that they read in class and then reflected on those experiences through writing. One important aspect in this curriculum project was having the parents get involved in the classroom to share their experiences and knowledge on Latino culture and heritage with the students. These school-community linkages helped students to see both the validity of their own experiences and to engage in a rigorous academic project and achieve success without feeling lost in the curriculum (Brozo, Valerio & Salazar, 1996).

By attending to the whole child when planning lessons educators can help students find academic success (Brozo, et. al. 1996). Brozo, Valerio and Salazar (1996) were not alone in that conclusion, Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2010) agree: “Allowing

students to connect with their culture while achieving academic success should not be a matter of cultural conflict for them; rather, it should be the standard upon which learning and cultural connection is based.” In their study on the preferences of African-American students toward culturally relevant lessons, Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2010) discussed a situation in which African-American students experience cultural discontinuity in schools. Because minority student’s home community culture is so different from the culture present in most schools, these students can become disengaged from the curriculum and from the school community itself (Bernal, 2002). This discontinuity can result in apathy, academic disengagement and discontent. The results of this can be seen in the achievement gap that is continuing to widen between White/mainstream culture students and those of minority cultures (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Howard (2001) continues this idea of teaching the whole child, by suggesting that examining communication styles in the home cultures of students can help to bridge their home-community and school-community experiences. In a series of studies that Howard (2001) examined while doing research on the topic, he found many instances where Native American, African-American and Native Hawaiian children were failing in school because of a discontinuity in the way they communicated with parents and teachers. Questioning methods were very different across the communities and made it difficult for students to understand what was being asked of them in school. In these situations, understanding and incorporating cultural ways of communicating and questioning can help to keep students who fail to achieve in the classroom on the path of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sparks, 2000). Ladson-Billings (2014) warns against only

incorporating shallow and stereotypical elements of culture, and instead work to learn *from* and not merely *about* the students and their background knowledge and experience.

Teaching the whole child is not an easy task, especially for a teacher with thirty students from different backgrounds. Progress towards an equitable and community oriented classroom starts with the teacher being motivated to learn about their students and excited to learn about the different cultures and backgrounds present in the classroom (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). According to Howard (2001) the best place to begin the process of learning what needs each student has, is to listen to the students themselves. Student perspectives are not often sought out, especially those of marginalized students, but the best source of information comes straight from them (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Zipin (2009) enhances this idea with the theory that one must “become open to learning about and from the lives of others, with conviction that these lives embody both intelligence and knowledge assets.” By creating a safe, caring environment in which students feel free to open up about their needs in the classroom and the differences between their home and school communities, teachers can begin the process of creating a learning environment that includes all students (Bernal, 2002).

### **Student-Teacher Relationships**

The final theme explored in this review of the literature is Student-Teacher Relationships. All of the previous themes, Identity and Achievement, Equity and Excellence and Teaching the Whole Child, revolve around teachers building relationships with their students in order to broaden understanding of what they need as individuals to achieve academically (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). By learning more about their student’s background, culture, identity, family and how they learn best, teachers are

creating relationships that move beyond classroom walls, and include more than just a scholastic interest in the student (Zipin, 2009). Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) found that “providing caring interpersonal relationships is a hallmark of CRP teachers.”

Teachers are important figures in their student’s lives, because of the amount of time students spend in schools, and their influence and caring behaviors towards students can go a long way in keeping them engaged and content in school.

Garza (2008) maintained that students need not only to like their teachers to learn in their classrooms, but they must have a sense that their teachers cares for them. This statement was based in large part on Noddings (1984) writings on happiness, caring and education. Noddings (1984) believed that caring is best demonstrated in ways expressed by the cared for, rather than deciding what those needs are without input from them.

Based on Garzas (2008) and Noddings (1984) work it can be determined that the most productive student-teacher relationships are reciprocal and respectful, with each party caring about the other and respecting their views. Students are more likely to state exactly what they need in the classroom to have success if they truly believe that their teacher cares for them and will respect their individual needs and viewpoint (Bernal, 2013). An important aspect of these relationships, with respect to CRP, is the notion that validating students cultural identity and language often translates into a form of respect by the student, and is key in building relationships that foster positive academic and social outcomes (Gay, 2013).

In Howard’s (2001) study on students’ perceptions of CRP, many students gave feedback that teacher relationships were one of the most important aspects to them achieving academic success; “The students stated that positive relationships between

teachers and students affected academic achievement. That teacher's responsiveness to students personal lives generated positive feelings... led to increased effort in school." (Howard, 2001). Most of Howard's (2001) results discussed students' perceptions of certain behaviors of their educators that translated into caring. One of the most common behaviors was high academic expectation, which students perceived as their teachers believing that they were capable of anything and that only a teacher who cared would put much effort into helping them achieve. Ladson-Billings (1995) designated this belief that all students are capable of success as one essential characteristic of being a Culturally Relevant Pedagogue.

The term "warm-demander" describes teachers of minority students who maintain high academic expectations, show care and concern for their students and keep a well-maintained classroom environment (Houchen, 2013). These educators often shift back and forth between stern and nurturing teaching styles, but in a way that conveys caring towards the student. This can be a difficult role for White teachers to take on in the classroom, as authoritarian behaviors are interpreted differently in White and African-American cultures. Howard (2001) explained "African-American students experience authoritarian parenting styles at home" and therefore link the warm-demander role to caring, parental style affection for the child. Student-Teacher relationships are a central foundation to implementing CRP in the classroom effectively, and only through trust and mutual respect can students feel incorporated into the educational system (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). To create change within the system, teachers should put thought and effort into creating and maintaining these relationships with their students, and should emphasize the essential role that each student has in the classroom.



**Conclusion**

It is clear that the works analyzed within this review are merely a few within a massive body of literature. These articles were all chosen for their relationship to the topic of enhancing student engagement in education with respect to CRP. While a few larger theoretical works were examined, most of the literature reviewed here contained practical applications of the theories that are the foundation of CRP. They were chosen for their practical nature, and though they were mainly small-scale studies conducted by educators on their own teaching styles and classrooms, they contain pertinent information for teachers looking to implement multicultural education in their own classrooms.

The topic of multicultural education and CRP is wide-ranging, with many different avenues from which to approach. By fleshing out the four major themes that were used to organize the literature, the direction of the research took on a narrowed approach (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). These four themes, Identity and Achievement, Equity and Excellence, Teaching the Whole Child, and Student-Teacher Relationships, were aspects contained in most works on this topic.

Literature on the topic of CRP has evolved over time, and will continue to evolve into the future depending on the changing needs of society (Gay, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995 & 2014). When African-Americans were the most outspoken group of disenfranchised students, their needs and perspectives guided the national conversation on multicultural and inclusive education. Latinos have grown in population, and their movement is gaining momentum, especially in states like California and Texas where their population is growing to a majority of the population. The emphasis on learning how to engage and teach multicultural students is an important one now in pre-service

teacher training as well as professional development by practicing teachers and schools around the nation. The importance of CRP is only growing in our rapidly expanding world, and this topic will likely remain on the forefront of educational research in the future.

Understanding the theories of Ladson-Billings, Gay and other scholars is important to all teachers, and the sort of small-scale research presented in many of these studies is important for practicing teachers to understand and implement on their own. In this way the situation in schools can continue to evolve and become more equitable in the future. Research in the past mainly focused on single disenfranchised cultures, and according to Gay (2004) the research is now increasingly focused on preparing for multicultural classrooms where several ethnic groups are represented. This many-cultured approach will be necessary for continued research and adaptation as immigration and population movement throughout the nation continues to bring diversity to all states.

While large-scale academic research and case studies are necessary to continue moving CRP forward, the topic of student engagement is an important one to find practical ways that all teachers can access and use this body of information in their classroom. Theory is important to understand and lay the groundwork for change, and putting that theory into practice is also vitally important for individuals who are actively seeking change within their classroom, schools and districts. Understanding Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is important, as is identifying the basic characteristics and attributes of the Culturally Relevant Pedagogues. In terms of the practical application of this type of research, Wortham and Contreras (2002) make a vital point: “Sometimes the differences between minority and mainstream U.S. cultural values force minority students

and their teachers to make hard choices. But sometimes minority students and their teachers can, through culturally relevant pedagogy, manage both academic success and cultural celebration.”

### Chapter 3: Methodology

#### Introduction

The methods that were used to gather and analyze data for the proposed study are outlined in this section. Using the research questions “Which aspect of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are students responding to based on the use of three strategies?” and “How does integrating these strategies of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into my teaching make me a more effective pedagogue?” to frame the research, the researcher used qualitative research methods to gather data. Over the course of six weeks, data was collected on a weekly basis to discover what aspects of CRP students responded to the most. Three strategies were drawn from CRP scholarship (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and used in class lessons and design to discover which aspects and strategies of CRP students positively responded to.

These strategies are:

1. Infusing the curriculum with cultural references and perspectives- this was achieved by having both students and teacher bring aspects of their background cultural knowledge into the classroom in order to connect life to text.
2. Creating a classroom environment where students were able to use their background and cultural knowledge as a basis for their education and create a sharing and trusting environment where students and teachers learn from each other- this was achieved by a final discussion and research project where students discussed the major themes of “the Merchant of Venice” through the lenses of self, text and world.

3. Make social justice a focus of the curriculum guiding students to look for, evaluate and create social justice in their lives and educational journey- students were asked to reflect on the themes of the book (racism, social justice, love, and social relationships) through writing and discussion.

The data was collected from several sources used to evaluate the impact these three strategies had on students' engagement to the curriculum and involvement in the class. Once the data was collected, the researcher analyzed this information through thematic and content analysis of selected student work samples and researcher field notes and reflective journal. The conclusions drawn by this analysis allowed the researcher to give some recommendations for other educators attempting to address the problems posed by the achievement gap in education and to become more effective teachers of multicultural students.

### **Research Design**

Action research was conducted in an English 10 classroom in a Monterey County High School. Over the course of six weeks, the teacher identified lessons that included one of three strategies identified at the beginning of the Methods section of this study. Data from the research subjects was collected through five instruments (*see Table 1*). The instruments were composed to gauge student responses to the three strategies to determine, if possible, which strategies led to positive impact on students in regards to culture and student engagement.

Table 1  
*Data collection instruments*

Data Collection Instrument:	Type of data collected:
Survey: 5 questions (Appendix 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantifiable data on Likert Scale (Hartley, 2014)</li> <li>• Open ended, student driven responses</li> </ul>
“Ticket out the Door” #1: What are five qualities of an excellent teacher?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open ended, student driven responses</li> </ul>
“Ticket out the Door” #2: On a scale of 1 (did not like) and 5 (liked a lot) how much did you like the Personal Funnel Activity? Please explain your answer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantifiable data on Likert Scale (Hartley, 2014)</li> <li>• Open ended, student driven responses</li> </ul>
Journal Write: Describe your ideal learning environment. What would it look like? What would the teachers be like? What and how would you learn?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open ended, student driven responses</li> <li>• Student work samples</li> </ul>
Researcher journal and field notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field notes taken during data collection lessons</li> <li>• Post-data collection journal entries</li> <li>• Data memos</li> </ul>

**Specific Research Plan**

At the beginning of the six-week study, all participants were given a survey to gauge their attitudes towards curriculum, classroom environments, teacher’s behaviors and student’s feelings about themselves as learners. The survey consisted of both multiple choice and short response questions. This survey was used to guide the researcher in utilizing the three strategies of CRP in daily lessons as well as providing a starting point for data collection. Throughout the six-week study, the researcher used one or more of the CRP strategies in a minimum of one lesson per week. Data was collected weekly in the form of “tickets out the door” at the end of the lesson where students answered one to two short answer questions about their responses to the lessons and to the strategies used. Additionally, student work samples and specific responses were

acquired through a journal write where students responded to a writing prompt that asked them to detail their ideal learning environment.

The data was analyzed for themes and patterns. The thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of student's thoughts, attitudes and responses to the strategies used. Once patterns were identified, specific written and oral responses were used to further examine the subject's feedback. The researcher also kept a reflective journal and observational field notes, which were used to connect data, draw conclusions and support researcher conclusions. All of the data was assembled and analyzed to find which, if any, of the CRP strategies used in the lessons created a positive response and increased engagement in the lessons of the subjects. In regards to the second research question, the researcher used her own notes, reflections and journal entries to determine how these strategies of CRP have affected her teaching in a positive or negative manner.

### **Setting**

Community: (City of Seaside, 2010) The town where the study took place had a population of 33,142 in Coastal California, in 2010. One third of this population was born outside of the United States, with 40% of the population identified as Latino. 35% of the population was identified as white, 8% as African-American, and 10% as Asian, with the remaining 7% identifying as Pacific Islander, Native American or other races. The median household income was \$57,399. Out of the population of age 25 and over (19,440 people), 29% had less than a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education, 22% were high school graduates, 22% had some college but no degree, 9% had an associates degree, 10% had a bachelors degree and 7% had a professional or graduate degree. There were 10,769 students enrolled in 14 different schools (elementary up through university).

School: (WASC Report, 2013) The setting of this study is a high school in Monterey County, California. The school had 1,038 students in the 2011-2012 school year. Out of these students, 57% were Latino, 11% African-American, 11% White, 7% Filipino, 6% Asian, 4% Pacific Islander and the remaining 3% American Indian.

Study Participants: The participants in this study were a convenience sample consisting of the entire 7th period class out of my 4 tenth grade English classes. The class had 34 students: 19 male and 15 female. 18 students spoke Spanish as their primary language, although only 2 students classified as English Learners with classroom assistance. One student spoke Samoan as their first language and the remaining 15 students spoke English at home. There were 4 African-American students, 6 White students, 4 Pacific Islander students, and 19 Latino students.

**Data Collection Procedures and Sources**

Table 2  
*Research questions and data analysis*

Research Question:	Data Sources:	Data Analysis:
1. Which aspect of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are students responding to based on the use of three strategies?	1. Survey 2. "Ticket out the Door" Questions 3. Journal write: What does your ideal learning environment look like? 4. Data memos	1. Thematic analysis
2. How does integrating these strategies of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into my teaching make me a more effective pedagogue?	1. Field notes and observations 2. Researcher journal	1. Content Analysis



A survey was given to the students at the beginning of the study. This survey consisted of five questions that gauged students' engagement towards curriculum, teachers and school. Every week throughout the study a quick 2-3 question multiple-choice survey was given in the form of a "Ticket out the Door" after a lesson that included one or more of the CRP strategies selected for this study. These questions were directed to gauge student response to the strategies used and the curriculum taught during the lesson; that information was coded and analyzed to find which strategies were most effective in engaging and interesting students. Student responses were collected during an informal journal write, where the students answered questions about their preferences in school and curriculum through a writing prompt given to them by the researcher.

In addition to student responses, survey data, and selected student work samples, the researcher kept a reflective journal and observational field notes. This data was used in addition to student responses to analyze the progress of the study and reflect on the researchers processes and progress. This journal was updated before and after each targeted lesson, before and after interviews, and while conducting research and collecting and analyzing data. This journal was reflective in nature and attempted to track the researchers observations of student progress during the study. Additionally observational field notes were kept, and were updated during targeted lessons, data collection and while observing and teaching students throughout the day.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed through thematic and content analysis, and some coding of the little quantitative data collected. The thematic analysis was organized to analyze students written responses and work samples, so that the researcher could compare students

responses and feedback against each other to get an overall idea of where the class stood in regards to which CRP strategy best effected engagement in the classroom.

Additionally, thematic analysis was used to identify themes through written responses and verbal feedback from interviews and conversations with students. The researcher tracked the themes and organized data accordingly. Most of the data collected was qualitative in nature, however a Likert scale (Hartley, 2014) was used with some multiple-choice questions on the survey and weekly data collection. Additionally, researcher journal and field notes were used to support the data analysis, connect themes and draw conclusions over the validity of the research and findings of the study.

### **Limitation/Threats**

The study was limited by the small size and six week timeline. For this reason the results of this study cannot be generalized to apply to the larger population, the results were only indicative of the specific school and classroom environment that it was performed in. The results would be more valid if this research had been conducted in more than one period of the day, or was conducted in more subjects and classrooms throughout the school. While the results show some clear themes and responses to the strategies used, more subjects would lead to a stronger conclusion. Additionally, data was collected over the course of six weeks, and while this was long enough to draw some conclusions, more data would make this a stronger argument.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Introduction:

This chapter presents the results of my action research study focused on the following research questions: 1. Which aspects of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are students responding to based on the use of three strategies? 2. How does integrating these strategies of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into my teaching make me a more effective pedagogue? Qualitative data was collected via a survey (*See Appendix I*), short answer “tickets out the door” and a journal write responding to a prompt (*See Appendix II*). The data was analyzed for common themes and patterns, which indicated what aspects of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, used in the classroom, students positively responded to through more active engagement with the curriculum. Three themes emerged from this analysis regarding the first research question:

1. Relevancy: Students connected and engaged more with the curriculum when it directly related to their personal lives and experiences and connected back to real world events.
2. Choice and Autonomy: Students wanted more choice and autonomy with curriculum and school subjects.
3. Relationship Building: Students wanted meaningful, significant and trusting relationships with their teachers.

One major finding emerged from this analysis regarding the second research question:

1. Multicultural includes ALL cultures: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and the practices that are associated with it, can serve to empower, engage and encourage students from all cultural backgrounds, races and genders.

These four findings were reflected in each of the four data sources that were collected over the course of the six-week study. Male and female students both contributed their desire for relevancy, choice and autonomy, significant relationships with teachers, as well as students from all cultural backgrounds. The subjects of this study reflected both a desire to learn more about current world events and cultures, as well as learning skills and curriculum that would prepare them for future career and college readiness. The unit of study in my English 10 class during this action research was centered around the Shakespeare play, “The Merchant of Venice.” I often heard students during class commenting that what happens in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Venice has no impact on their lives. One Pacific Islander student responded that school curriculum doesn’t always relate to him on a personal level “because I don’t use the things I learn in school all the time.”

**Relevancy:**

Throughout the data collection process I frequently had students comment that the things that they learn in school have little to do with “real life” or “real world” issues. Students from all cultural backgrounds complained that they weren’t learning things that would benefit them in the future, or that the things that they learned in school were so separate from what they considered “real life” that it had no relevance to them. Many students commented that they wanted the opportunity to learn college-oriented skills that would directly lead to college and career readiness. In addition to career and college preparation, students repeatedly indicated that they were interested in learning more about current world events and other world cultures outside of the United States. This interest in relevant

subject matter was found across the demographics of this study. Both male and female and students from all cultural backgrounds felt that the curriculum and academic subjects in their school were lacking a relevance to their lives.

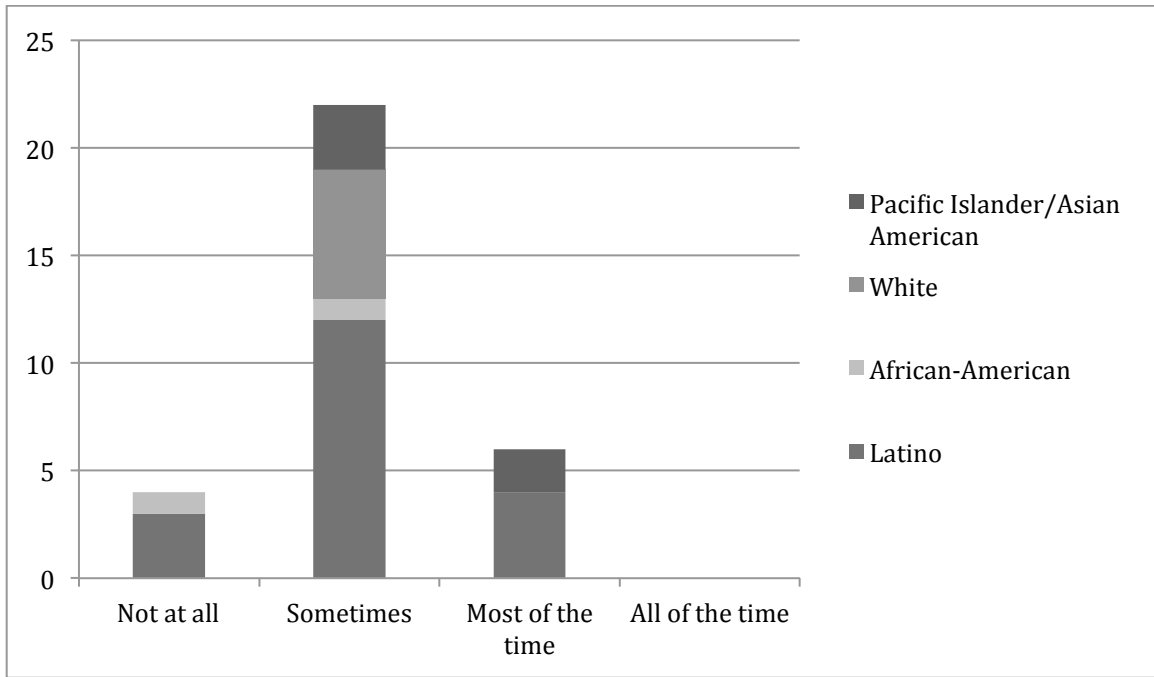


Figure 1. Survey, Question #3: Do you think the things that you learn in school relate to you on a personal level?

Of the 32 students who filled out the survey, when asked if they thought that the things they learn in school relate to them on a personal level, 4 students responded ‘not at all,’ 22 responded ‘sometimes,’ 6 responded ‘most of the time,’ and no students felt that the things they learned in school related to them on a personal level all of the time. One male student, identified as Chilean-American, commented, “Teachers aren’t good with relating the topics with anything really.” A White male student, when asked if the things they learn in school relate to them on a personal level, responded: “some help with personal things but other things I believe are irrelevant.” One Latino male subject’s statement is worth noting, “I think that what I learn in school helps me think of what I want to do in life.” His statement clearly

underscores the notion that personalizing schooling increases the likelihood for relevancy, which in turn creates more interest in learning.

**Topics of Interest.** Question five on the survey asked students to name three topics or issues that they would be interested in learning more about in school. There were many different topics named by students ranging from sports, racism, government, religion, life, history and many others. Of the 53 topics listed by the student’s in an open-ended response format, 12 wanted to discuss specific school subjects or topics, and 39 wanted to discuss topics relating to social issues, world events, and American pop culture. 8 responses named racism as a social issue they were interested in, 3 responses were related to world news and current events, 3 students listed women’s issues, 5 wanted to learn more about “real life issues,” and 6 responded drugs, bullying and sex.

Table 3  
*Survey, Question #5: What are some topics or social issues that you are interested in talking more about in school?*

Student Demographic:	Topics/Social Issues:	Comments:
American-Chilean, Male	Talking about what goes on in the world, Racism, Discrimination	“The reason we learn so much is just because of the idea of a renaissance man knowing many things so we can be more well rounded but we don’t even use half of the stuff we learn.”
Latino, Male	Religion, Government, Life	“I think we should talk about these topics because it’s a good way to show how the world is.”
Guamanian, Female	Real life stuff	“Stuff that is relevant to real life.”
Latino, Male	Racism, Laws, Athletics	“This would be more interesting.”

The first strategy of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy that I attempted to include in my curriculum and teaching strategies throughout the study involved infusing the curriculum with cultural references and perspectives. The second strategy involved creating a classroom environment where students could use their background knowledge and experiences as a basis for their education and connection to the text. To do this, I created a “funnel activity” where students distilled the main characters motivation for their actions through funneling the character’s primary monologue down to one word and analyzing their actions in relation to that word. After they had completed this activity, and justified their choice to the rest of the class, I had them do a similar activity with a more reflective nature. First, I had them write a journal entry exploring their personal interests and passions. Then I had them do the same “funnel activity”, where they distilled their own motivation down to one word from their journal. This complimentary “personal funnel activity” was designed to get them to interact with the text and characters of “The Merchant of Venice” through a personal lens looking at what actions in their life are in concert with the characters in “The Merchant of Venice” and whether they impact motivation in a positive or thoughtful manner.

**Connections to student’s personal lives.** The majority of students who participated in the lesson enjoyed the opportunity to relate subject matter to their own lives, and to spend class time discussing their own and their classmate’s motivations. Many students commented on their enjoyment of relating the subject matter back to their own personal lives. A male, Latino student stated, “I really liked this activity because I got to know something that motivates me.” Another Latino

male student stated that he gave the lesson a “5 [out of 5] because I was able to talk about what I like.” A female African American student commented, “I like that we got to write about what we like.”

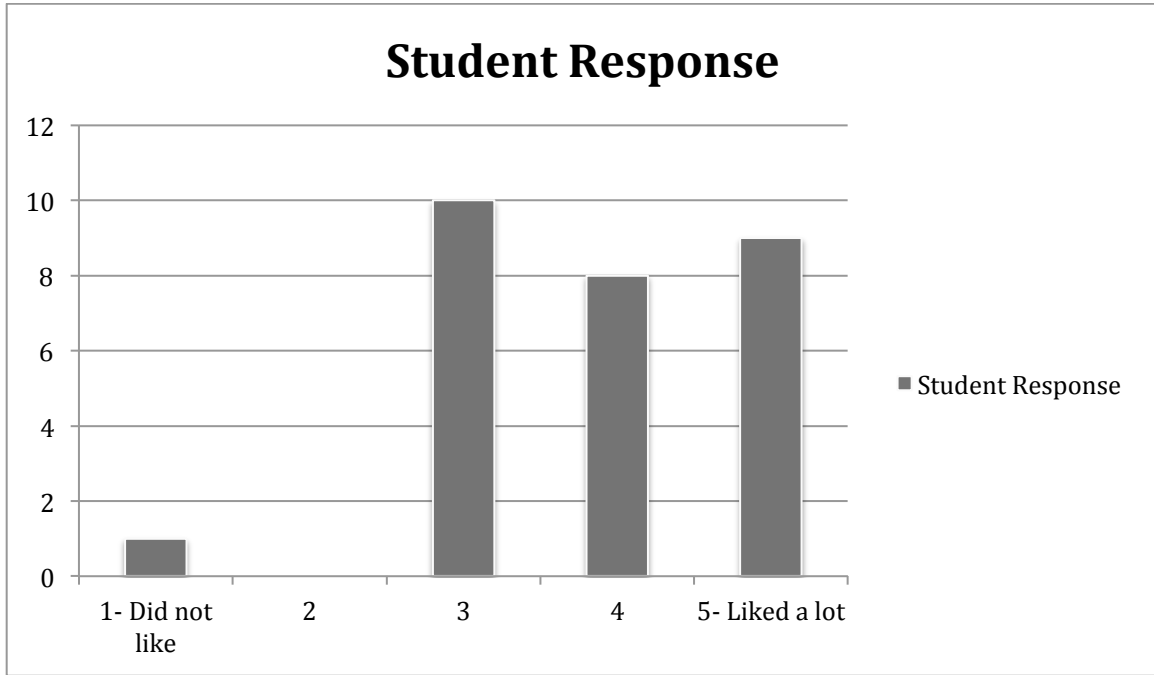


Figure 2. “Ticket out the Door” #2, Personal Funnel Activity: Rate this activity on a scale of 1 (did not like the lesson) to 5 (really enjoyed the lesson)

While not all students indicated that they wanted to learn more about things and topics relevant to them, a majority of the 34 students in the classroom at some point indicated that they wished the things they learned in school were more relevant to their personal lives and the outside world. I found that all students, regardless of cultural background, indicated that they would be more engaged by relevant curriculum and topics than by some of the things that they considered irrelevant in school. A White male student, when asked about whether or not they enjoy reading more if they could read about topics they were interested in, commented, “If you are able to read something you like it will be more interesting.”



A Pacific Islander student, when asked the same question, remarked, "I love reading articles of what's happening around the world."

**Ideal learning environment.** When asked what their ideal learning environment would look like, 13 out of 31 respondents replied that they would like to learn real life subjects. Twelve (12) respondents wanted to learn more preparation for college and future careers in school. The career preparation coursework that they suggested was Business (3 respondents), Logic (1), Language (2), Body Language (1), and Taxes (1). A Latino male student commented, "I would be learning business because that's what I want my career to be. All the subjects would be things I would use in adult life." Another Latino male student responded, "Only have to take classes that you need for what you want to be in the future." A male African-American student also wanted more relevant topics, commenting, "Real life subjects, real life learning."

This theme was reflected over and over again in the data analysis, appearing frequently in each of the four data sources, as well as the researcher notes and journal. Relevance in school, curriculum and subjects was a stated desire for male and female students alike. The desire to discuss school topics that they can clearly see a use for surfaced in student feedback and in student/teacher conversations throughout the semester.

### **Choice and Autonomy:**

Another theme that emerged from the data analysis from my six-week study was that students are more engaged when they have personal choice and autonomy in the things that they learn in school. Especially in the English class where this

study took place, students found Shakespeare to be a difficult text to interact with, and most would have preferred to have some choice in the book that was being read. On the occasions where I gave students options for assignments I found an increase in engagement with the activities. To that end, I often tried to give them several topics to choose from in writing activity, so that they had some autonomy in the classroom even though they were still required to complete the same assignment.

**Choice and Autonomy in literature.** In the survey (*See Appendix I*) that was given to the students, the first question asked them if they enjoyed reading and the second question asked them if they would enjoy reading more if they could choose their own books and/or topics. The majority of students indicated that they would enjoy reading more if they could choose the topic. When asked if they liked reading (*Survey, see Appendix I*) 8 out of 32 students responded “Not at all.” Eighteen (18) out of 32 responded “Sometimes”, and only 6 out of 32 responded “Yes.” One female Latino student responded, “It’s boring to me.” A male Latino student commented, “Yes, if I find the book interesting.” Many of the students indicated that they would prefer choice of topic in their reading options. A Pacific Islander male stated, “I love reading articles of what’s happening around the world.”

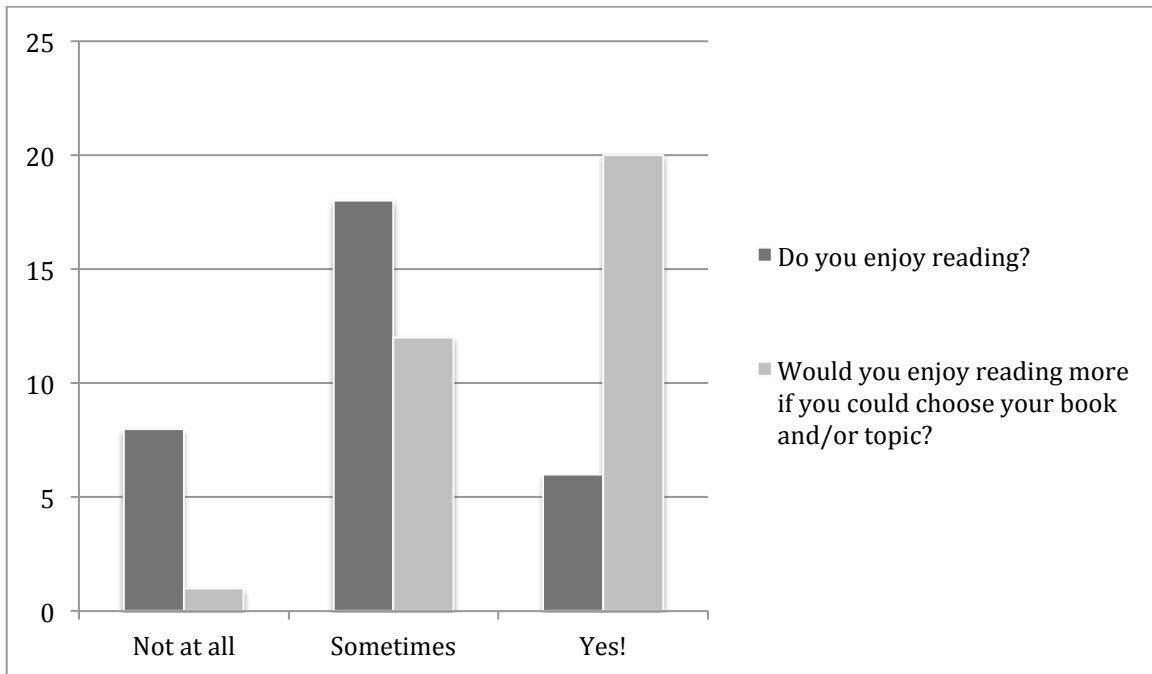


Figure 3. Survey, Question #1 & #2: Do you enjoy reading? Would you enjoy reading more if you could choose your book and/or topic?

Question #2 of the survey (*see Appendix 1*) asked students if they would enjoy reading more if they could choose their book and/or topic. Twenty (20) out of 32 students answered, “Yes” to that question. A female student commented, “Yes, I would love that!” Another respondent replied that, “It would be nice.” A third student replied, “ I would choose the books of how I feel at the moment.” The responses to this question, as shown by the sample of student comments, was overwhelmingly positive towards students engaging more with texts when they have choice in their subject matter.

**Choice and Autonomy in the learning environment.** When students were asked to describe their ideal learning environment, 11 out of 32 listed choice in school curriculum and class subjects as part of their ideal learning environment. 12 indicated that they would like to be able to choose classes in preparation for future careers based on their own interests and future goals. The responses that reflected

the theme of choice and autonomy came from about a third of the students; both male and female students wanted more choice in school along with students of all cultural backgrounds. A sample of the student’s responses can be seen in *Table 4*.

Table 4  
*Journal writing prompt: Describe your ideal learning environment*

Student Demographics:	Comments:
Female, Latino	“There would be writing also. I would like to write essays but of our choice.”
Male, White	“I would prefer to choose what to read other than us having to read an exact book.”
Female, Latino	“Whatever we want to get into [for a career] we start to engage in that field.”
Male, Filipino	“The assignments I would prefer would be assignments that are engaging but also prepare us. Something that relates to our interest so that we enjoy doing our assignments.”
Male, Latino	“You only have to take classes that you need for what you want to be in the future.”
Male, White/Chilean	“You would learn exactly what you like/help you [for the future]. What subjects would be taught? As I said before only what you need. Let’s be honest, when are you ever going to need to use geometry in the real world? Only if you become an architect.”

I observed this desire for choice and autonomy in the classroom and in classroom subjects often during my daily lessons even when I was not collecting data for the study. Students wanted more choice and autonomy in every aspect of their educational journey. They wanted to choose their own seats and partners for group work. They wanted to be able to choose which assignment they would like to complete, instead of only having one option. And they responded positively to lessons where I gave them that autonomy. In one lesson, I had students complete a compare/contrast diagram of two characters from “The Merchant of Venice.” They

had the option of two different types of diagrams to use to do this activity. Only one had to be filled out and put in their notebooks. While they were still required to follow the exact same process and have the same general outcomes in the assignment, they liked that I was giving them options to choose from.

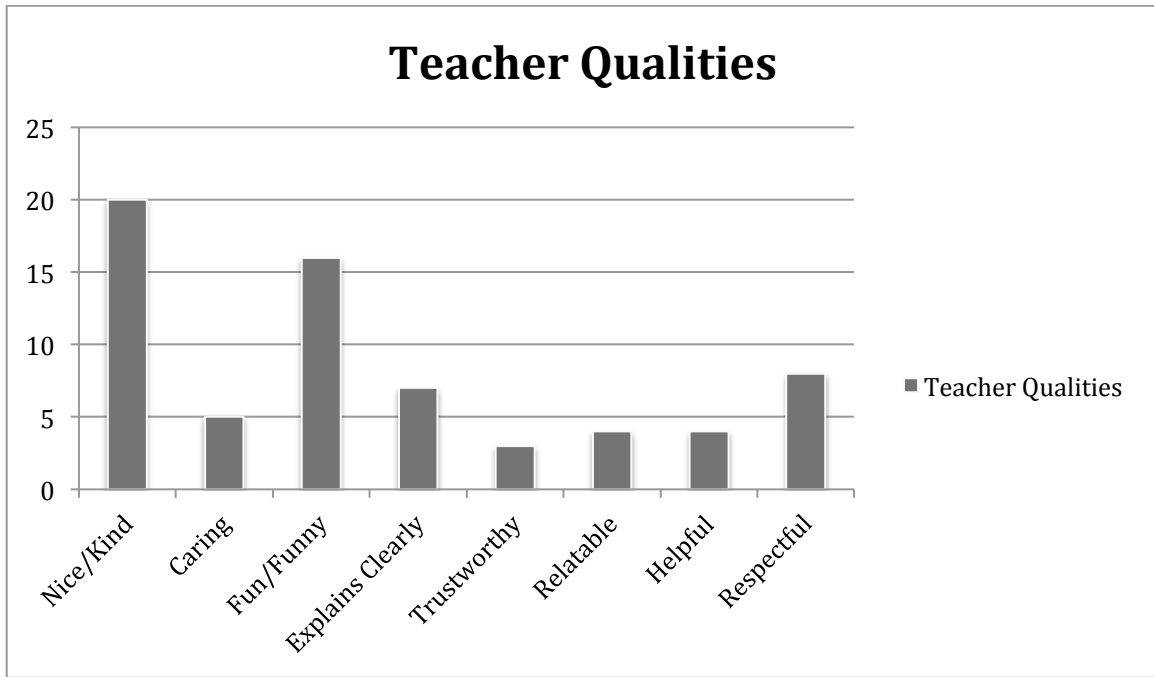
When analyzing the data collected during this study this theme came up in each of the four data collection groups. Students wanted choice and autonomy when choosing subjects, completing assignments, interacting with their teachers and engaging in the school community. They expressed this in the journal write, the “tickets out the door,” the survey, and when talking to fellow students and instructors, both inside and outside of class. By giving students choices in the learning process, teachers are validating that they can be trusted with choices, thus creating a positive cycle of learning and engagement.

### **Relationship Building:**

The third theme that surfaced during the analysis of the data was that of Relationship Building between students and teachers. Students continually commented that they wanted trusting, significant and meaningful relationships with teachers. This seemed to go beyond just a classroom and curriculum based relationship; students commented that they wanted teachers who could understand what they might be going through in life, had respect for them, and who were relatable to by the students. Students wanted to be able to open up to their teachers, and have their teachers reciprocate this type of trust and interaction.

Students were asked to list 5 qualities of a good teacher as one “ticket out the door” during this study. The qualities that were listed by students compared very

closely to the definition of a “warm-demander,” as defined by Howard (2001) and Houchen (2013). Below *Figure 4* depicts the qualities of a good teacher that came up most frequently in the 32 “ticket out the door” responses.



*Figure 4.* “Ticket out the door” #1: What are five qualities of a good teacher?

Twenty (20) out of 32 students wanted their teachers to be nice and/or kind. This desire for warmth in their teachers was noted nearly across the board, with words like caring listed 5 times, “doesn’t yell” was written 3 times, and “good listener” came up 2 times. One student wrote, “Show respect and care for the students.” Another student agreed, commenting that a good teacher “doesn’t always yell.” Another respondent wrote that a good teacher shows “kindness, enthusiasm, energy and respect.” Out of the five qualities that the students listed, at least one quality was dedicated to the warm qualities of the teacher, whether that be nice, kind, caring, or happy.

In addition to having a warm teacher, 17 out of 32 students listed that it was important to have a teacher who provides examples, helps them succeed and spends time working with each student for the best academic result possible. Seven (7) out of 32 wanted a teacher who explains things clearly, 4 wanted a teacher who was helpful, 3 requested someone who teaches well, and 2 wanted a teacher who gives examples. One student responded, "Should be able to teach in different ways."

Another student wrote that a good teacher "Explains everything simple as possible," and "offers as much opportunities to better your grade." A third student wanted a teacher who, "Explains the instructions more clearly and takes their time." Another student wrote they wanted a teacher who would be "working 1 on 1 with students." Across the data, more than half the students indicated that it was important that their teacher be ready and willing to help them do well in the classroom.

Half of the students, 16 out of 32, also indicated that they wanted their teachers to engage with them beyond the curriculum. They want their teachers to get to know them, be ready to connect with them beyond just schoolwork, and create a more significant and meaningful connection. I experienced this often in the classroom, where students wanted to come in and tell me about their experiences and interactions, and they wanted me to be interested. One student commented on a ticket out the door that she liked the personal reflective funnel activity because "I got to share with you what I like to do in my own time." They also were interested to get to know me beyond just being Ms. Pine. They loved hearing about my life outside the classroom, wanted to know what I did over the weekend, and were very curious about my personal life. This deeper connection helped to make classes

more interesting, and the students were more engaged in whatever curriculum we were working with.

One student responded that a good teacher “interacts with us.” Another requested that their teachers “Get to know all of your students.” A third respondent wanted the teachers to be able to identify with their students, commenting that a good teacher “can understand what you go through on a certain day.” Another student responded similarly, writing that a good teacher “understands how us students feel.” A third student backed this up saying that a good instructor “is able to connect with students. [Is someone] that gives respect to get respect.” Two other qualities that popped up in the student responses were “trustworthy” (3 times) and “relatable” (4 times).

### **Multicultural Education Includes ALL Cultures:**

The fourth major finding of this study came mostly from the researcher journal entries, reflections, data memos and field notes and was a reflection of research question #2: How does integrating these strategies of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into my teaching make me a more effective pedagogue? While I was conducting this study I frequently noted that White students, who historically out-achieve minority students, appeared frequently as disengaged with the curriculum as their Latino, African-American and Asian-American classmates. They reacted positively to the same strategies of CRP that their other classmates did. This required a change in my thought process when I approached lessons. Instead of finding ways to change and modify my teaching to reach a certain percentage of my “minority” students, I instead had to completely rework the way that I approached



education at all. If all students can benefit from the strategies of CRP, then I needed to approach every lesson and my entire curriculum from this perspective

**Conclusion:**

While there were a number of other themes that surfaced throughout the data analysis process, the four findings discussed in this chapter were the most relevant and applicable to the topic of enhancing student engagement in the classroom. As a classroom teacher I was looking for findings from this study that I could practically apply to my classroom activities, curriculum and routines. The first three findings (Relevancy, Choice and Autonomy, and Relationship Building) are all things that I can reasonably incorporate into my teaching to improve engagement and academic success. These are all things that I can control and work on every day that I teach.

The student response towards these themes was very positive, and these themes transcended gender and race. Students of all genders, languages and cultural backgrounds seemed to agree that these were the changes that would most positively affect their learning experience. There were many different ways that I could have guided this research, but I specifically wanted to find ways to apply CRP within the boundaries that are acceptable in a public high school. In a school like this I do not necessarily have the freedom to completely change the curriculum, class size, or basic set up of the school day. Since these things are out of my hands, I wanted to find some practical applications of CRP and multicultural education that I can apply to a Common Core curriculum in a classroom setting with large classes

and a very diverse student body, and I feel that the findings presented in this chapter lend themselves to these restrictions.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Introduction:

This chapter provides a discussion of the overall study focused on the following research questions: 1) Which aspect of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are students responding to based on the use of three strategies? 2. How does integrating these strategies of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into my teaching make me a more effective pedagogue for multicultural students? This chapter will summarize the purpose of the study and the main ideas from the literature that were used in the action research that was conducted over the course of six weeks. The overall findings of the data that was collected and my personal thoughts on these findings will be shared as well. Next, I will discuss the limitations of this study, as were discovered throughout the action research. I will conclude this chapter with an action plan for putting the results of this study into practice in the classroom setting.

### Summary of literature and action research:

This study was focused around student engagement in multicultural populations, where there is a large academic achievement gap between White, majority culture, students and students from other multicultural backgrounds. This achievement gap is a problem that persists throughout the United States, and is incredibly apparent in places, like California, where White students are no longer in the majority of the student population (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). So-called “minority” students have grown more numerous in the population, but fail to grow in test scores, graduation rates, and college attendance. Research has shown that teaching culturally relevant curriculum in the classroom can assist in closing this gap (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

This study was structured using the theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), introduced by Ladson-Billings (1995), which promotes the idea that multicultural or disenfranchised students often disengage from the curriculum and the school environment because they lack the cultural connection to their teachers and their subject matter. One of the methods for re-engaging these students is by creating a home community and school connection, that, when taught by a culturally sensitive and aware pedagogue, can assist in connecting students to their education and provide them opportunities for academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Another method of creating an inclusive and engaging environment in school is to create a curriculum that reflects student's cultural heritage and background knowledge (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2010).

This action research conducted attempted to discover which aspects of CRP students responded to most positively, and which aspects the researcher could use to enhance engagement in the classroom. The students who participated in the study completed surveys, written responses, and short answer tickets out the door at the end of class periods. The questions that were asked of students during the study were designed to indicate what aspects of curriculum, the classroom environment, and daily activities that they felt contributed to their academic success. They were also asked to describe the qualities of educators that best translated to an engaging and positive learning environment in the classroom.

Using the two research questions: 1) Which aspects of CRP are students responding to based on the use of three strategies? 2) How does integrating these strategies of CRP into my teaching make me a more effective pedagogue for

multicultural students? I attempted use various methods of data collection to come up with a series of practical applications for CRP that can be applied in any classroom environment to further enhance the engagement of the students and promote positive academic success for these students.

**Findings restated:**

Data was collected through a survey, a journal writing prompt and two “tickets out the door” (*See Appendix I & II*). The data was then organized by thematic analysis; I took each piece of data and visually organized it by themes. Four themes clearly emerged from the data showing the most impact on student engagement and learning:

1. Relevancy: Students connect and engage more with the curriculum when it directly relates to their personal lives and experiences and connects back to real world events.
2. Choice and Autonomy: Students want more choice and autonomy with curriculum and school subjects.
3. Relationship Building: Students want meaningful, significant and trusting relationships with their teachers.
4. Multicultural education includes ALL cultures: While this study originally set out to work on increasing engagement in “minority” student populations it became clear that these strategies have a positive influence on all students, male and female as well as students from all cultures, including White, African-American, Latino and Asian-American students.

Students indicated that they wanted curriculum, activities and learning experiences that are more relevant to their lives, experiences and their futures; this theme

appeared over and over in student responses during the study. They also frequently mentioned that they wanted to learn more about the world in general. Students wanted to know about current world events, to learn more about other cultures, and to get a more general sense of how and why things happen. In addition to learning more about the world at large, students wanted to learn things that are going to be productive for their futures. They wrote again and again that they wanted to learn more specific career and college preparation skills. This topic came up in every questionnaire that was given over the course of the study. Students brought up this theme more than any other during the data collection process.

Choice and Autonomy is the second theme that emerged from the data analysis process. Student responses reflected this desire to have more personal choice in how and what they learn. They wanted the ability to choose their own classes and subjects in school. Most students wanted the ability to learn about things that they were interested in. Aside from choosing their own classes, they frequently mentioned being able to choose where they sat in the classroom, who they worked with during class activities, and what kinds of activities they did in class.

The third theme that emerged was Relationship Building between students and teachers. The data reflected a want for deep and significant relationships between teachers and students. The students wanted to feel like their teacher actually knew something about them, and could relate to where they were in life. They frequently shared their daily triumphs and tragedies with me, and were highly interested to learn more about me, and about my personal life outside of school. They wanted their teachers to be relatable, trustworthy, easy to talk to, interested in their lives, and caring.

The last finding, that Multicultural education can have positive benefits for all students regardless of cultural background, emerged in response to the second research question: How does integrating these strategies of CRP into my teaching make me a more effective pedagogue? While I expected to find that my non-White students responded better to these strategies than my White students, what I actually found is that all students, regardless of cultural background, appreciated and responded positively to lessons that incorporated the three strategies of CRP. This last finding will radically change my approach to teaching and my educational philosophy. If the majority of my students react positively to these strategies, then I need to shift my mindset away from using them to include non-White students, and instead craft my entire approach to education around them.

While other themes emerged during the thematic analysis of the data, the first three mentioned above, Relevance, Choice and Autonomy and Relationship Building, were by far the most quantified. They were repeated by almost every student throughout the study, and were mentioned over and over sometimes in the same response. When I look back at my reflective journals written during this study and at my personal observations during classes and conversations with my students, I see these themes reflected there as well. However, the central finding that came out of data drawn from my reflective journals, data memos and field notes, was that all students, regardless of culture, reacted positively to these strategies drawn from CRP scholarship. This last finding was also drawn from data drawn from student responses on the survey and “tickets out the door.”

**Personal thoughts on findings:**

During the study and the data collection process, as I observed and worked with the 32 participants in my study, I watched these themes float to the surface. Because our unit of study was a Shakespeare play, my students often had difficulty relating our readings in class to their personal lives. This disconnection between text and self was starting to create a disengaged atmosphere in the classroom. To bridge this gap, I began having students write journal entries relating their personal experiences with the major themes of the play: racism, gender roles, family, and justice. Once they could compare their own life experiences to that of the characters, through these themes, we began to have more engaged and increasingly interesting classes.

As I conducted the study and started seeing responses relating to relevancy, I attempted to make these personal reflections part of every assignment and activity that we did. Students were asked to compare the racism that Shylock experienced in “The Merchant of Venice” to situations that they had experienced in their own lives. Once we began discussing these themes in connection with self, the students opened up and shared past experiences and family histories with the class, and class discussions got much deeper and more involved. The theme of relevancy went beyond making personal connections to the text, but I found that to be the best way to work this into daily lesson plans.

Students were asked to envision their utopian learning environment in a journal write, and that is where I saw this theme of relevancy discussed in the most concrete way. Many students envisioned a school where they only had to take subjects that they liked, or that they thought were vital to future careers. Most students wrote math out of the



curriculum entirely. While this sort of student driven, relevant utopian learning experience is not possible at most public High Schools, I did attempt to work some of this into the curriculum by having students write journal entries and have discussions that focused on their futures: what kind of career they were interested in, where they might go to college, what motivates them, what are their passions, and how they might use their education to make these things happen. The goal, as I see it, is not to create a curriculum that only focuses on subjects that students already like, but to create a curriculum and learning environment where they see how relevant all the necessary subjects are towards their futures. To create an environment where students who hate math are learning it in a way that they can see the relevance of math with respect to their own futures is important to keep engagement and connectivity high with regards to curriculum.

The second theme, Choice and Autonomy, was a topic that I personally remember wanting more of in my own secondary educational experiences. I always enjoyed having choice in books to read, classes to take, and where and when to do things. This was no different in my students. They wanted input in their education, and were more motivated to do well when they had gotten to have some choice with in class. I quickly learned that by providing at least one small choice for them per day, I was giving them more authority and responsibility for their own educations. This was an exciting find to have validated through my research, as it was something I had been striving to give anyway.

I usually let students pick their own partners to work with, provided that they stay on task. Another method of giving them more autonomy in the classroom was to give two or three writing prompts for their quick response journal entries, and give them the option of which prompt they wanted to respond to. There are other methods of choice

and autonomy that I would like to pursue more in the future; options for different types of projects and presentations to show their knowledge, and opportunities to create their own assignments based on the types of learning and doing that they are most inspired by

Building meaningful and significant relationships with the students is something that I have always strived towards in my teaching. The main reason that I wanted to be an educator was because I enjoy working with and learning from young people. Being an educator is a constant adventure, even while teaching the same material to thirty students I have to constantly adapt the lesson and my teaching of it to each student to adjust to their specific learning needs. I have found that I can't make those adaptations without knowing more about the student than their grade in my class. I need to know how they are doing that day, if their home life is going to affect their performance in class, what their specific needs are in the classroom, and how to approach them as one human to another.

It helps to know how the social structure of the class will affect classroom environment, and I cannot do that without knowing who is friends with who, what students do not get along, which students need to sit up front, and which can handle sitting more towards the back. To that purpose, I allowed students to eat lunch in my classroom and made a point to have daily conversations with them and create a relationship so that they wanted to confide in me. I found when students trusted me they were more likely to come in and ask for help, and to take the time to work on their grades and classroom performance. I worked hard to create and maintain those relationships by trusting them with stories about my life outside of school; when I would confide in them, it often led to them confiding in me.

My overall goal during this study was to find applicable and practical methods of teaching multicultural students and enhancing engagement in curriculum and increasing their levels of academic performance. With the three themes that have come to characterize my study results, relevance, choice and autonomy, and relationship building, I feel that I have found three methods of further connecting with and engaging my students. These methods reflect the theoretical model that this study was based upon, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and Critical Race Theory (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006), and yet, I hope, provide some practical methods that all educators could use in their classroom to work with students of all backgrounds and cultures.

While this study was focused on increasing the engagement of non-White students, I found that all students, across race and gender, found these themes to be the most important aspects of their education that were lacking. It was an interesting discovery that these things do not only work in favor of non-White students, but that all students can benefit from having increased relevance, choice and autonomy and deeper relationships with their teachers. While the academic achievement gap between White and non-White populations of students continues to be a real problem, all students can be positively impacted by these tools and methods of CRP.

This last finding, that these tools apply across all cultural backgrounds, is perhaps the most personally profound, as it is changing how I view education entirely. If my educational perspective shifts away from targeting populations that aren't succeeding academically and using these strategies to reengage them, to structuring my entire classroom and curriculum to reflect all students and expecting a more engaged, self reflective classroom from the very beginning, then I think more students will succeed

overall. Applying these strategies and incorporating more choice, relevant material and working on my relationships with students from the beginning could create a more positive environment for all students.

**Limitations:**

A major limitation of this study was time. I was a long-term substitute in the classroom where the study was conducted, and I was only in the class for one quarter of the school year. This meant that I had to pick my participants, prepare for the action research, get to know my students, and gather the data within a limited time period. I had originally planned for a longer and more intensive study, but there were some factors that were unavoidable that shortened the time period of my study. The first was the administration of the CAHSEE high school exit exam, which all of my students were required to take the last week of the quarter. The second was the administration of a performance task that all sophomore English classes were required to take. Between preparing the students for these exams, and losing classroom time to the administration of these exams, I was forced to shorten my data collection period considerably.

I had originally planned a final unit at the end of the quarter that would connect student's home experiences with the major themes of "the Merchant of Venice" through a roundtable discussion and group project. This final assignment would address all three strategies that were drawn from CRP and used to document student response to CRP in the classroom (*see Chapter 3*). By the end of the quarter, however, the preparations for the CAHSEE testing had gotten in the way, and we ran out of time for the final assignment. That project was intended to be one of my major data collections, and the

inability to collect that data and finish the unit with the students, impacted the final direction of my study.

Instead of being able to document which strategies of CRP that students responded to most positively, most of my data relied on questionnaires and responses by students that looked at what they wanted most out of their education. The responses that I got helped me to establish which methods of CRP they wanted most in the classroom, but it shifted the results away from the three strategies that I had previously targeted. This was a serious limitation to the study conducted; however, the results that I did manage to gather were highly interesting and gave me significant data to reflect upon.

I found, as most classroom teachers do at some point, that despite the best intentions of the public school schedule, there often a time when teachers have to choose whether to cut out curriculum they feel is important to the learning outcomes of the students or to focus on standardized testing preparation. While this is an unfortunate choice that I feel can sometimes degrade the ability of teachers to fully explore a subject, it is a fact of life and a limitation both to this type of research and to classroom teaching in general.

Another major limitation was size and scope of this study. Because only 33 students participated, and they were a small sample size of the high school as a whole, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population. The themes that emerged from the study and the implications of those themes are not necessarily true of all students at that school or all students across high schools in the region. To truly draw conclusions on a larger scale, this study would have to be conducted in many high school classes over a much longer period of time.

**Action Plan:**

There are endless changes that I could make in my classroom to reflect the findings of this study in my classroom, however I think it is important to focus on some specific methods that I will introduce to reflect these findings. Based on the comments and input by my students, I think incorporating a daily or weekly activity that both gives students some choice and an ability to connect the curriculum back to their lives and create a relevant link from curriculum to self is going to be an important step towards creating a more engaged classroom. In addition I want to include a method to create more lasting and significant relationships between teacher and student, which will happen at the beginning of the school year.

I plan to institute a daily or weekly reflective journal that students will keep in class. Every day they will choose between several writing prompts that are designed to connect their personal lives and reflections to the themes and curriculum that we are learning about in this classroom. This journal entry could be done through a written response or through a cartoon, series of drawings, poem or other reflection of the student's capacity to communicate. The goal of this daily journal is to give students some choice in their classroom activities, form of expression and help them maintain some autonomy in the classroom. Additionally the writing prompts would be written to guide students towards making connections between text and self. The overall goal of this journal would be to engage students in the curriculum through these connections, creating a more relevant curriculum that students would be more interested and engaged in.

The second aspect of the Action Plan is to work on creating, building and growing relationships between students and teacher from the beginning of the year. This would be kicked off at the beginning of the year with a personal history project where students get to bring in their family and personal story and share it with the class. To begin this process of sharing and trust, I would start the year by presenting my own story to them, with hopes of gaining their confidence by sharing my personal history with them. Each student would present part of their family history to the class and would make a visual representation of their own story that would decorate the classroom. Part of creating an engaging learning environment is to create a community that students can both feel safe and take pride in. By starting of the year with our personal stories and goals and continuing to engage this community though class discussion, reflective journals, and an open sharing community, I hope to continually grow and deepen relationships with students.

There are dozens of other activities, future plans, and strategies that could be used in a classroom to create a more engaged and academically successful environment, however the two detailed above will be my starting points. Every good Action Plan needs a solid foundation to build upon, and those two sustaining activities will be mine. My goal as an educator is to never stop learning or improving upon my teaching practices, and so these two are merely a starting point in a lifelong journey that will lead, hopefully, to a lifetime of inclusive, engaging and academically successful teaching practices.

**Conclusion:**

Since the very beginning of my journey towards becoming a teacher, my very first day in the School of Education at the University of Portland, multicultural education and the ramifications that are a result of hundreds of years of racism in our society have been a concern of mine. I have seen the results of this racism while teaching in a very diverse school in Portland, Oregon, where African American students had soaring drop out rates and very low test scores. This study was an attempt to answer some of the questions that I have had, since that first day of college, about teaching non-White students and driving their academic success. I do not see the results of this action research to be an endpoint in my drive for educational equality and a search for better teaching practices, merely the beginning to what I see as a life long journey to find success for all of my students, regardless of their racial and cultural backgrounds. The literature and grounding theories examined in chapter one and two laid the foundation for my study to take place, and the data that I drew from that study are laying the foundation of my future educational practices. Hopefully, this drive within myself to find a successful place for each student in my future classrooms will only grow over the years, and my skills and strategies as a teacher will grow more sophisticated and effective towards teaching a group of increasingly culturally diverse students.



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**Appendix I**

Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Background \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you enjoy reading?

- a. Not at all
- b. Sometimes
- c. Yes!

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Would you enjoy reading more if you were able to choose your own books/topics?

- a. Not at all
- b. Sometimes
- c. Yes!

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Do you think that the things you learn in school relate to you on a personal level?

- a. Not at all
- b. Sometimes
- c. Most of the time
- d. All of the time

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you feel like your background and culture are reflected in the culture of Seaside High School?

- a. Not at all
- b. Rarely
- c. Sometimes
- d. Frequently
- e. Always

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What are some topics or social issues that are interested in talking more about in school? This can be anything that you would like to do/learn about/talk about. These can relate to English class or be broader topics.

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Appendix II**

“Ticket out the door” #1

What are the 5 qualities of an excellent teacher?

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_

“Ticket out the door” #2

On a scale of 1 (did not like) to 5 (liked a lot) how much did you like the Personal Funnel

activity?      **1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

Explain your answer: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Journal Write:

Describe your ideal learning environment? What would it look like? What would the teachers be like? What and how would you learn?