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## Teacher Perception of Promoting Student Engagement Among Culturally Diverse Students Through the Use of Culturally Relevant Strategies

Ivey Pearl Addison  
*University of South Carolina*

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TEACHER PERCEPTION OF PROMOTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AMONG  
CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS THROUGH THE USE OF CULTURALLY  
RELEVANT STRATEGIES

by

Ivey Pearl Addison

Bachelor of Science  
College of Charleston, 2003

Master of Education  
Columbia College, 2006

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Accepted by:

Tambra Jackson, Major Professor

Rhonda Jeffries, Committee Member

Joshua Gold, Committee Member

Daniella Cook, Committee Member

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the study was to investigate teacher perceptions of the impact culturally relevant pedagogy has on student engagement. The study explored the beliefs, attitudes and perspectives of four elementary school teachers. Observations and interviews were utilized to gather qualitative data for this study. Teacher lessons were used to achieve triangulation. The findings will provide teachers with a conceptual framework that can be adapted to improve academic achievement.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODCUTION**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of the impact culturally relevant pedagogy has on student engagement. The study will explore the beliefs, attitudes and perspectives of four elementary school teachers. Interviews and observations were utilized to gather qualitative data for this study. The findings will provide teachers with a conceptual framework that can be adapted to improve academic achievement.

### **Introduction**

As public schools strive to increase students' academic performance, the relationship between student engagement and academic achievement has gained considerable attention (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009; Dunleavy, 2008; McInerney, 2009; Smith, 2009; Zyngier, 2008). School engagement is vital to students' academic achievement and educational attainment. According to Lippman and Rivers (2008), "Students who are disengaged from school are at risk for poor academic achievement, skipping classes, sexual activity, substance use and ultimately dropping out of school" (p. 1). The term engagement is usually used to describe constructs such as quality of effort and involvement in quality learning activities (Kuh, 2009). The connection between student engagement and academic achievement was summarized by Fredricks, Paris and Blumenfeld (2004):

Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes; including achievement and persistence in school; and it is higher in classrooms with supportive and teachers and peers; challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice and sufficient structure (p. 4).

A variety of strategies have been implemented by federal and state authorities to raise student achievement overall and for different groups (Braun, Wang, Jenkins & Weinbaum, 2006). One contemporary attempt to address student achievement concerns is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Liebttag (2013) explains, “The Common Core State Standards aim to ameliorate some of the issues of teaching, learning, and testing that have been plaguing schools” (p. 57). The Common Core State Standards provide clear benchmarked standards for the teaching profession (Gardner, S. & Powell, R., 2013). The standards clearly detail what is expected of students at each grade level. The Common Core State Standards “provide a foundation upon which to align curriculum materials, instruction, assessment, and professional development (Kornhaber, M., Griffith, K. & Tyler, A., 2014, p. 7). Teachers must choose instructional strategies that capture the interest of students and promote engagement.

### **Background of the Problem**

Decades of research include efforts to identify and implement strategies to increase student engagement (Fredrick, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004; Garcia-Reid, Red and Peterson, 2005; Kidwell, 2010). Teachers play an integral role in fostering student engagement. The role of the teacher cannot be minimized, and it is the nature and context of instruction that most influences student engagement (National Research Council, 2003.) Engaged students are more likely to perform well academically. Therefore, teachers need a large inventory of instructional strategies to engage a variety of students (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005). A teacher’s ability to address cultural diversity in the



classroom has an impact on a student's academic success (Rowley & Wright, 2011). According to Yazzie-Mintz (2010), understanding the student experience and strengthening the student-school connection is essential for developing cultures of learning in schools and raising achievement. Although high-stakes testing is standardized, students do not benefit from standardized instructional strategies.

Student engagement is defined broadly as participation in school as evidenced by time on task, positive attitudes, interest and investment in learning (Reeve, 2006). More specific definitions of engagement can include participating in learning on cognitive, behavioral, sociological and psychological levels. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004) have identified and explained three types of student engagement that have emerged in school research literature:

- 1) Behavioral engagement draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out.
- 2) Emotional engagement encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influences willingness to do the work.
- 3) Cognitive engagement draws on the idea of investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills. (p. 3).

Marks (2000) presented student engagement as a psychological process involving “the attention, interest, investment and effort students expend in the work of learning. Defined in this way, engagement implies affective and behavioral participation in student learning” (p. 155).

Student engagement and student achievement are often linked together. Current studies show that student engagement is one of the best predictors of academic

achievement (Dolezal, Mohan, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Fredricks et al., 2004; Park, 2005). Pinkus (2008) suggested that the elementary years are proving to have great significance in student achievement: Students with an achievement ranking in the top 75% in as early as the fourth grade have a higher probability of graduating from high school. Many teachers feel the pressure and have a desire to improve professionally so student learning and test scores can increase, yet many do not know exactly how to effect changes that lead to such improvement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Alderman, 2008). The body of literature on student engagement includes a variety of instructional strategies and approaches that have been implemented with the goal of increasing academic achievement (Fredrick, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004; Garcia-Reid, Red and Peterson, 2005; Kidwell, 2010). Visibly absent from the body of literature is elementary teachers' perceptions of utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy as an approach to increase student engagement. Teachers strive daily to ensure academic success for all students and their perspectives and perceptions are valuable and worthy of being acknowledged. Harris (2008) notes, "As research suggests that teachers have a significant effect on how learning occurs in the classroom, it could prove important to understand their conceptions of what it means for students to be engaged" (p. 60). The voice of the participants of the current will resonate with other educators, especially elementary teachers.

As the population continues to change and become more diverse, there is a greater need to focus on the way in which culturally diverse learners in the classroom are being instructed. Brown (2007) states:

The dramatic demographic shift in the United States is more apparent in the public schools than anywhere else. But this change in the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the student population is not the problem. The problem lies in the way educators have responded to that change. A positive or

negative response could affect the self--esteem and academic success of students from these varied racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. (p. 57)

About one third of the population in today's schools is represented by linguistically, culturally and ethnically diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Cultural, ethnic and language diversity in public schools in the United States is rapidly becoming the norm, rather than the exception (Phuntsog, 2001). Phuntsog (2001) stated that this factor has posed great challenges to the process of educating diverse learners. Teachers must adjust their approach to meet the varied cultural needs of the students that they serve.

To ensure that diverse students are afforded equitable and rigorous learning opportunities, classroom pedagogy must align with the standards to meet the needs of the students. Effective instruction uses pedagogy that incorporates cultural backgrounds to make sense of the world and work towards improving it, while in turn utilizing strengths to effectively enhance academic and social achievements (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2009). Culturally relevant pedagogy is a theoretical framework for education that embraces students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2000). "Culturally responsive teaching" is a slightly different phrase used by Gay (1994) to describe "culturally relevant pedagogy." Gay describes the pedagogy as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. She describes the utilization of cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students as a means of making learning more appropriate and effective for them.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The importance of engaging all students in their education continues to resonate strongly with families, students, educators, and researchers (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008). School populations represent a diverse combination of students. Classrooms are filled with students of many racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. Each student is a unique blend of individual interests, backgrounds, stories and needs (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Many students never make meaningful connections to the content or become disengaged because of the way the content is being taught. Research identifies the significance of student engagement in relation to academic success (McMahon & Portelli, 2004). The lack of engagement most often translates to poor academic performance for marginalized students. Most academically disadvantaged students do not do well in school (Palumbo, A. & Kramer-Vida, L., 2012). My study adds insight on the types of instructional strategies that promote student engagement and addresses the diverse needs of students. My research provides educational leaders with the necessary knowledge to plan meaningful professional development opportunities for teachers.

The teaching styles, expectations and norms in most classrooms in American public schools can be defined as having a Eurocentric focus. The White mainstream society shapes what constitutes a normal classroom setting. According to Rowley and Wright (2011), “If a teacher perceives a student to be inefficient in the dominant culture due to atypical behaviors, or codes of speech, or to be of average or lower intelligence, there is a higher possibility of academic failure” (p. 94). Gay 2010 stated:

Some educators fail to realize that the assumptions, expectations, protocols, and practices considered normative in conventional education are not universal and immutable. They are based on the standards of the cultural system of one ethnic group-European Americans -that have been imposed on all others. This cultural system is a human creation and, as such, is fallible and mutable. Its biggest fallibility is its assumed universality and “that’s the right way” justifications for its beliefs, values, and behaviors. (pp. 243-244)

Many culturally and linguistically diverse students do not experience success in the traditional classroom setting. This requires the implementation of strategies that will meet the needs of all students and ensure success for all learners. In non-Eurocentric classroom, teachers understand that their beliefs cannot be imposed on their students and teachers express the value of the background of each of their students. Instead the teachers value the beliefs and behaviors that the students already possess upon arriving to school and look for ways to engage all students in the learning process (Gay,2010; Haberman, 2005; Ladson--Billings, 2009). It is imperative for teachers to commit to doing all that they can in their sphere of influence to work towards eliminating the achievement gap (Gorski, 2013).

The discourse on student engagement includes studies in which different formats of student engagement are identified or factors that promote or hinder engagement are explored (McMahon & Portelli, 2004). The current literature uses various instruments to measure student engagement and determine if particular instructional methods and strategies have an impact on the level of engagement. The body of literature is missing the illumination of teachers’ perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy’s impact on engagement among culturally diverse elementary school students. The instructional decisions made by teachers have the greatest impact on student learning; therefore, having an awareness of their thoughts and beliefs is imperative. The voice and

perspectives of elementary school teachers will expand the body of literature on student engagement.

### **Nature of the Study**

The study will focus on the following research questions:

- 1) How do elementary teachers at Seventh Grove Elementary School define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Student Engagement?
- 2) What are the teachers' assumptions and perceptions of the ways in which their instructional strategies impact student engagement?
- 3) In what ways does teacher perception inform practice?

Data collected from this study provide insight into teacher perceptions of the ways in which student engagement is impacted by the instructional strategies utilized by the teacher. The qualitative study allows the researcher to avoid judgments or predictions about the outcome as the study relies on comments from participants to shape the outcome (Creswell, 2009). The fact remains that no other group in American education is in a better position to judge the effectiveness of their instruction than teachers (Applegate, A. & Applegate, M., 2010). Research conducted by Sanders (2003) confirms that teachers are the “single largest factor affecting academic growth of students” (p. 10).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Enhancing student engagement persists as a challenge to educators (Marks, 2000). The concept of “school engagement” has attracted growing interest as a way to ameliorate low levels of academic achievement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). The full implementation of the Common Core State Standards will require teachers to increase the rigor of their instruction and change how they think about engaging students

(Gardner, S. & Powell, R., 2013). The quantity and quality of instruction predict students' achievement (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine teachers' perceptions of the extent to which the engagement level of culturally diverse students is impacted by the utilization of culturally relevant teaching strategies and techniques. The beliefs and attitudes of teachers influence their practice. The current study addresses the perceptions of teachers regarding student engagement through the collection of qualitative data. This study was designed to investigate how elementary teachers articulate the impact of their instructional strategies. The goal of this study was to focus on teachers' perceptions of the impact instructional practices may have on the engagement of culturally diverse students. Harris (2008) states, "Research on teacher understanding of student engagement appears to be absent from academic literature" (p. 60). Despite the amount of research on student engagement, little is known about the perceptions of elementary teachers on whether or not culturally relevant pedagogy has an impact on students' level of engagement. The student engagement discourse is clearly missing the voice of teachers. Most researchers agree that the single most important factor and the quickest way toward improving education are through the classroom teacher (Marzano, 2007). Investigating the perception of teachers should provide a better, more complete understanding of the feelings toward the use of culturally relevant teaching strategies in the elementary classroom setting. Teacher perceptions and reactions to their experiences provide powerful insight to examine the effectiveness. Understanding the definitions and methods teachers use to engage students may provide useful information for engaging students. This study attempts to add a new component to the body of literature on student

engagement through the investigation of the use of culturally relevant teaching strategies. The current study sought to develop an understanding of the ways in which teachers define culturally relevant pedagogy and articulate the impact of the culturally relevant strategies and methods of teaching used in their classrooms.

### **Methodological Framework**

A qualitative research approach was utilized to investigate elementary school teachers' perceptions of using culturally relevant pedagogy and the impact it has on student engagement. Qualitative research provides a framework to interpret the significance of lived experiences. Merriam (1998) defines qualitative research as, "An umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural as possible" (p. 5). The methodology allows researchers to capture and legitimize the voice of the participants. The key component of qualitative research is the participant's perspective. The participant's perspective is based on experiences which shape how he or she views the world. The nature of reality in qualitative research is the reality of the lived experiences of the participants.

### **Operational Definitions**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined in an attempt to assist the reader in understanding key concepts:

*Beliefs*: Mental constructions of experience that are held to be true and that guide behaviors. Beliefs are inferences, made by an observer, that represent an educator's judgment. These beliefs can be discerned through the educators' verbal statements, pedagogical choices, and classroom behaviors (Sigel, 1985).



*Culturally Relevant Pedagogy-* A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Instruction which uses students' cultures and strengths (cultural capital) as a bridge to success in school achievement

*Student Engagement-* a disposition that reflects the extent to which students identify with, value, and respond to educational experiences, personnel, and schooling outcomes.

*Teacher Perception-* This is the view that teachers have about culturally relevant pedagogy and student engagement.

### **Assumptions**

The Common Core State Standards Initiative seeks to improve teaching, learning, and equity by making the education system more coherent (Kornhaber, M., Griggith, K. & Tyler, A., 2014). As an educator, I am aware of the emphasis placed on identifying ways to improve academic achievement. My academic background and experience as a teacher has helped me to understand the importance of student engagement. I am conscious of my pivotal role in fostering student engagement. Teachers must make the work they create and assign relevant to their students. Students who are interested in the class work will be persistent, even when the work is challenging (Matin & Pharr, 2010). Based on my observations and what is noted in the literature, students who are actively involved and engaged in the learning process are more likely to perform well academically. My perception of student engagement includes observing students who are participating, on-task and asking questions. There is a strong correlation between student engagement and relevant curriculum that is meaningful to students (Kidwell, 2010). I believe that if students are interested in what is being taught or the activity being

completed, they are more inclined to participate and remain engaged. Through my experience as a fourth grade teacher, I have learned that students enjoy activities and learning experiences that are meaningful. Based on the literature, I frame and determine whether or not the teachers' practices align with the theory.

There are several assumptions that are directly related to the current study. I assume that the participants will answer all of questions truthfully that are presented during the interview and will teach a lesson during the observation that is reflective of their normal teaching practices. I also assume that the sample is representative of the school population that I plan to make inferences about.

### **Limitations**

The study's specific focus is on teachers' perceptions of the impact of one pedagogical framework of teaching on student engagement. The study does not compare more than two frameworks of teaching nor does it compare the impact of culturally relevant teaching on male and female levels of engagement. The length of the study is limited to less than one academic year, which happens to be the first year of Common Core State Standards implementation. Another limitation is that the data collection is limited to one school. The results of the current study do not produce results that can be generalized to a larger population.

### **Scope**

The scope of the current study is the investigation of the perceptions of four participants on the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement. A qualitative study will be used to gain insight through interviews using qualitative questions and classroom observations. Interview questions will explore how they view

the impact of their teaching strategies on student engagement. The sample size of four participants will allow an in-depth analysis of the teaching experiences that frame the participants' perceptions.

### **Delimitations**

The current study is delimited to only third through fifth grade teachers at the same research site. The study is delimited to only those participants who were chosen were chosen as a convenient sample. The study is delimited to the investigation of only one teaching methodology.

### **Significance of Study**

**Knowledge generation.** Quantitative research has identified engagement as an area of educational interest; however, this type of research cannot be used to explain how people make sense of the concept (Harris, 2008). My qualitative research study adds the perspectives and perceptions of teachers to the general body of literature on student engagement. My research includes elementary school teachers' perceptions of the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement. Teacher voices are particularly important (Applegate, A. & Applegate, M., 2010). My research will provide a deeper understanding of utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy by incorporating knowledge and experience from the perspective of elementary school teachers.

**Professional application.** The findings of this study will produce new knowledge and add to the knowledge of how elementary teachers articulate their perceptions about student engagement and culturally relevant teaching and how the beliefs frame their teaching. The results will allow educators to gain insight and understanding from professionals who work one on one with students daily. The participants' input can be

used to inform the instructional practices of educators. A research goal of the current study was to generate findings that could enhance instructional practices utilized with culturally diverse learners. Administrators will have concrete research to use to make decisions about professional development and school-wide initiatives.

**Social change.** Disengagement has been cited as a major cause of deviant behavior at school, truanting, and low academic achievement (Harris, 2008). The instructional strategies and pedagogical practices identified and described in this study will illuminate what teachers perceive to be effective culturally relevant strategies used within an elementary setting. The findings will provide insight to assist teachers with developing a conceptual framework that can be adapted to improve academic achievement. Large-scale changes in instruction and assessment accompany the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and require school and district stakeholders to make important decisions about curricular materials, instructional methods and assessment practices (Halladay, J. & Moses, L., 2013). The results from this study will shed a new light on culturally relevant pedagogy and help educational leaders provide effective professional development to assists teachers in implementing a culturally relevant approach to teaching.

## **Summary**

Various instructional strategies have been researched and implemented in an effort to increase student engagement. Marginalized students will continue to be disengaged unless a classroom culture of student engagement is created. A classroom culture that values and respects the funds of knowledge of each member of the learning community is imperative to ensure the success of all students. Recent research on

culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally relevant educators recognizes the role of teachers' knowledge and beliefs in understanding and improving instructional practices in culturally diverse classrooms. Exploring the relationship that exists between educators' knowledge and beliefs and the ways in which those beliefs influence teaching behaviors is an important and visionary area of research. Chapter 2 of the study explores the relevant literature which provides background information on previous research studies on both student engagement and culturally relevant pedagogy. This review also provides a general overview of the body of literature on student engagement. Chapter 3 provides the research methodology and outlines the framework of the research design used in this study. Chapter 4 will present the results of data collection, analysis and preparation as outlined in the previous chapter. In conclusion, Chapter 5 will focus on presenting the response to the research questions posed in Chapter 1, and also provide implications for practice, recommendations for future research and general conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine teacher perceptions of the ways in which student engagement is impacted by the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. The relationship between student engagement and academic achievement continues to gain significant attention as public schools are under increased pressure to improve student achievement. Identifying and investigating instructional strategies and approaches to promote student engagement will assist educators in boosting academic achievement. This chapter includes a review of published literature related to student achievement, student engagement and culturally relevant pedagogy. The review was conducted using the ERIC database to locate articles. First, research and studies on student engagement are the focus of exploration. Next, the focus shifts to teacher perception and the connection to effective teaching practices and student achievement. The last focus of exploration is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

### **Student Engagement**

**Philosophical.** McMahon and Portelli (2004) offered an initial philosophical inquiry into student engagement. According to McMahon and Portelli (2004), studies rarely focus on student engagement from a philosophical perspective and consequently, the term student engagement has become a popular, but at times, an empty and superficial, catch-phrase or slogan. An examination of meanings and definitions of student engagement from current literature yields the identifications of three major types. The conservation or traditional conception of student engagement is described by

McMahon and Portelli (2004) as being exclusively identified with a certain conception of academic achievement or a process identifiable by behavior traits and/or observable psychological disposition. McMahon and Portelli (2004) describes the liberal or student oriented conception of engagement as a focus on the strengths of students in contrast to a deficit model which maintains that students fail in school because of internal deficits or deficiencies. According to McMahon and Portelli (2004), the critical-democratic conception of engagement describes engagement beyond simply a matter of techniques, strategies, or behaviors. Engagement is generated through the interactions of students and teachers, in a shared space, for the purpose of democratic reconstruction (McMahon and Portelli, 2004).

A broad or single view of student engagement is used by some researchers (Reeve, 2006; Willms, 2005). A broad definition of student engagement is defined as student participation in school as evidenced by time-on-task, positive attitudes, interest, and investment in learning (Reeve, 2006). In terms of student engagement, research has outlined engagement as a multifaceted construct. While there are different opinions on what constitutes engagement, corresponding to the perspective and school of thought of the researcher, it is agreed that engagement is a product of multiple factors (Wilms, 2003; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995; Russell et al., 2011; Brewster & Fager, 2000; Scheletchy, 2011). There is a potential for confusion due to proliferation of constructs, definitions, and measures of concepts that differ slightly.

The lack of a clear and consistent definition of student engagement leads to different interpretations. This is an important consideration that has to be taken into account when gaining insight about teachers' perceptions of student engagement.

Appleton, Christenson and Furlong (2008) critically examined how the engagement construct has been used by educators and propose a way to integrate perspectives that have been used in research. The approximately 22-year history of engagement highlights its need for a clear definition (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008). As explained by Appleton, Christenson and Furlong (2008), the theoretical and research literature on engagement generally reflect little consensus about definitions and contain substantial variations in how engagement is operationalized and measured. One constant across the myriad conceptualizations of engagement is that it is multidimensional; however, agreement on the number and types of engagement dimensions differ (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008). According to Appleton, Christenson & Furlong (2008), the way student engagement is conceptualized, the importance of multiple engagement subtypes, and its applicability for all students is paramount to advancing the use of this construct and improving academic, social, and emotional learning outcomes for students. Across varied conceptualizations of student engagement with school, there is promising empirical support for the construct's relations with important social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008). The perceptions of the participants in my study will add to understanding of how to conceptualize student engagement.

According to Kidwell (2010), there is a strong correlation between student engagement and relevant curriculum that is meaningful to students. If students are not engaged in the learning process, all of the testing, data analysis, teacher meetings and instructional minutes in the world in the world will not motivate them to learn (Kidwell,



2010). Kidwell (2010) validates the importance of utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy. Making learning relevant has an impact on the schooling experience of students.

According to Toshalis and Nakkula (2010), research shows that achievement and motivation are inextricably linked. There is no single motivational pathway or type of engagement that guarantees academic achievement (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2010). Each student is a unique blend of individual interests, backgrounds, stories and needs (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2010). The differences should be viewed as resources that can enhance learning. Culturally relevant pedagogy embraces the notion of incorporating the aspects of students' identity to help students make a connection to what is being learned. Regardless of grade level, fully engaged students tend to earn higher grades, perform better on tests, report a sense of belonging, set or respond to personal goals, and persist on meaningful tasks (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).

### **Theoretical Studies**

Positive student engagement in the classroom is a compelling factor that research has reported to be critical in enhancing student achievement (Akey, 2006; Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003; Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005). Jones (2008) notes that simply telling or encouraging students to engage themselves in their class work is seldom enough. Many teachers who constantly see disengaged students put the burden on the students and lament that they could be better teachers and have better results if they had the opportunity to work with a "better" group of students (Jones, 2008). A key aspect of pedagogy that helps teachers create an environment in which rigorous and relevant learning can take place is designing for rigorous and relevant learning (Jones, 2008). According to Jones (2008),

Relevance can help create conditions and motivation necessary for students to make the personal investment required for rigorous work or optimal learning. Students invest more of themselves, work harder, and learn better when the topic is interesting and connected to something they already know (p. 5).

According to Martin and Furr (2010), success for a teacher is defined by the success of his or her students, not his or her efforts or good intentions. The work that teachers create and assign must be relevant to their students. Instructional time that is used for meaningful work activities will engage students at a level that enables them to retain what they learned (Martin & Furr, 2010). Martin and Furr (2010) explain, “tasks must be worthy of students’ attention and effort: purposeful, of high quality, aligned to state standards, and relevant” (p. 18). My study gives insight on teachers’ perceptions of how the tasks described by Martin and Furr (2010) impact student engagement.

Yazzie-Mintz (2010) recommended creating a culture of engagement. Student engagement is not a policy to be implemented, but rather a culture to be created (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). Five principles that can be used to as a starting guide to create a culture of engagement are explained. Yazzie-Mintz (2010) suggests: know what the students think; believe what students say and care about what students think; set a clear purpose for education in the school and ensure that it is enacted by everybody in the school community; create structures and processes that meet the learning needs of the students, not just the needs of the adults and engage all students deeply and equally. Understanding the student experience and strengthening the student-school connection are essential for raising achievement and developing cultures of learning in schools (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

### **Empirical Studies**

Marks (2000) conducted research to examine several theoretical perspectives that attempt to explain engagement through comprehensive frameworks. The study uses

identical models to investigate engagement patterns at three grade levels. Marks (2000) examined the major theoretical frameworks proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Finn (1989, 1993) and Newman (1981, 1992) that explain student engagement. Marks (2000) investigated whether patterns exist in students' engagement, whether the patterns are consistent across grade levels and whether class subject matter differentially affects engagement. The sample includes 3,669 elementary, middle, and high school students. Schools that made substantial progress in restructuring were selected, which included 8 elementary schools, 8 middle schools and 8 high schools. Marks (2010) utilized a quantitative research approach which included the completion of surveys by students about themselves, their schools and their classroom experiences in mathematics or social studies. Marks (2000) conceptualizes engagement as a psychological process, specifically the attention, interest, investment and effort students expend in the work of learning. The analysis conducted by Marks (2000) found that personal background accounted for little of the variance in engagement among the students, authentic instructional work contributes to the engagement of all students and a positive school environment enhances the engagement of students at all grade levels. Marks (2000) determined that across all three grade levels, girls were significantly more engaged in instructional activity than boys. Also, no racial and ethnic effect on engagement was present at any grade level. Marks (2000) states that the finding that girls are more academically involved than boys is consistent with the findings of previous research on engagement. Marks (2000) suggested that girls' engagement may reflect a greater concern on their part for academic performance than for boys.

Although the findings of Marks (2000)'s study adds to the current body of literature on student engagement, the results were limited by several factors. Marks (2000)'s investigation of student engagement levels across subject areas determined that mathematics classes promote high levels of engagement among elementary and high school students much more than social studies classes do. However, it is important to note that Marks (2000) focused only on mathematics and social studies and did not take other subject areas into account. Also, only a portion of the complete sample, consisting of students in Grades 5, 8, and 10 from six core classrooms, was used to investigate engagement in instructional activity.

Marks (2000) noted that because engagement with academic work is fundamental to students' intellectual achievement, the basis for subsequent research and policy formation should focus on understanding the structures and processes that influence student engagement. The current study will contribute insight on culturally relevant instructional practices that impact student engagement to the body of literature. The current study will provide an understanding of the ways in which these instructional strategies contribute to student engagement.

The results from my study assist in the implementation of instructional strategies to increase student engagement for both boys and girls.

Bodovski and Farkas (2007) conducted research using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study to examine the mathematics readiness levels and their importance to subsequent achievement growth and the efficacy of instruction and engagement in producing such growth. According to Bodovski and Farkas (2007), there is no consensus in the literature about whether children who start school with low levels

of knowledge improve, remain at the same relative position or fall even further behind their peers over time. Similarly, there is no consensus on whether students who begin school with high achievement maintain their high rate of learning or assume a slower pace over time (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007). An analysis of the large national sample of representative data concludes that the level of mathematics knowledge at the beginning of a students' school career is associated with the gains students make subsequently (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007). Bodovski and Farkas (2007) also discovered that the students who began with the lowest knowledge also showed the smallest gains. Student engagement has a positive effect on mathematics achievement gains at all grade levels tested (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007).

Although Bodovski and Farkas (2007) established the importance of conducting longitudinal studies using nationally representative samples of children performing at all achievement level, the researchers did not collect data for the study discussed in the article. Bodovski and Farkas (2007) analyzed data provided by the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. Bodovski and Farkas (2007) presented findings that were consistent with studies that show continuity in students' achievement over time; however, the study conducted by Bodovski and Farkas (2007) measured outcomes based on a constructed analytical sample which included only students with available data on their mathematics scores at four times: the fall of kindergarten; spring of kindergarten; spring of first grade and spring of third grade. The components of successful learning were not examined by Bodovski and Farkas (2007), neither does the study provide evidence of the types of instructional strategies that promotes student engagement which results in increase academic achievement.

Bodovski and Farkas (2007) suggested that future studies seek to discover which instructional practices work better with different groups of students, contributing to their academic engagement and promoting student learning. My study adds suggestions for instructional strategies to the body of literature on student engagement. The current student analyzed teachers' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses culturally relevant pedagogy on culturally diverse students.

Harris (2008) conducted a phenomenographic study to map secondary school teachers' conceptions of student engagement. According to Harris (2008), student engagement developed as an academic concept during the 1970s and 1980s, with many early constructs emphasizing time on-task and participation. Harris (2008) investigated the qualitatively different conceptions of what it means for students to be engaged. The study identified six qualitatively different conceptions of engagement in learning.

According to Harris (2008), the following categories suggest the conceptions of what student engagement is:

1. participating in classroom activities and following school rules
2. being interested in and enjoying participation in what happens at school
3. being motivated and confident in participation in what happens at school
4. being involved by thinking
5. purposefully learning to reach life goals
6. owning and valuing learning

Although Harris (2008) stressed the importance of using a qualitative approach to explain how teachers make sense of student engagement, the study is limited to the voices of secondary school teachers. Phenomenography is utilized by Harris (2008) to gain a

collective understanding that is representative of the entire group. However; this approach allows the conception of the participants to frequently change, views follow-up interviews as a new set of data which are unable to confirm the original set and does not use techniques to ensure that research has been conducted in a rigorous manner. The approach used to collect the data is important to note, especially when considering the validity and reliability of the results.

Data from the study suggest that not all teacher conceptions of student engagement are focused on engagement in learning (Harris, 2008). The body of literature on student engagement is lacking continuity on the how the concept is defined. Harris (2008) proposed that another approach be utilized to further examine the empirical results of this study. The current study used a qualitative study to add the perspectives of elementary school teachers to the body of literature on student engagement. This allows common themes to be identified about how the construct is defined by elementary school teachers thorough their description and use of examples.

Wiggan (2008) explored school engagement and success among high achieving African American students. The findings of the phenomenological study reveal three main school effects impacting the students' performance: 1) teacher practices, engaging pedagogy versus disengaging pedagogy; 2) participation in extracurricular activities and; 3) the state scholarship as performance incentive. Wiggan (2008) revealed, "According to the students, engaging pedagogy impacted their school achievement and was associated with caring teachers, where caring meant being committed to teaching and developing professional relationships with students (p. 338).

## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

**Philosophical.** An abundance of literature suggests that the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy is beneficial for ethnically and culturally diverse populations (Gay 2002; Ladson Billings 1995a; 1995b; Sheets, 1995). Scholars have argued that culturally relevant pedagogy should be utilized to help bridge the gap between students' diverse experiences and the school curriculum (Banks et al., 2001). Gay (2010) contends:

The education of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students should connect in-school learning to out-of-school living; promote educational equity and excellence; create community among individuals from different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds; and develop students' agency, efficacy, and empowerment (p. 49).

Students have cultural resources that teachers must know and understand in order to effectively design lessons, implement and evaluate the teaching and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2002). The lack of knowledge of both subject matter and student population results in teachers who are not truly prepared to teach. Recognizing that students come to school with some degree of knowledge is important for educators to understand. Culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy is theoretical framework for education that “attempts to integrate the culture of different racial and ethnic groups into the overall academic program” (Baker & Digiovanni, 2005, p. 25)

Ladson-Billings has extensively described culturally relevant teaching in her books and articles. Ladson-Billings (1992) maintained that this is an approach that serves to empower students to the point where they will be able to examine critically educational content and process and ask what its role is in creating a truly democratic and multicultural society. It uses the students' culture to help them create meaning and



understanding of the world. Thus, not only academic success, but also social and cultural success is emphasized (p. 110).

Gay's initial thoughts about effectively teaching ethnically diverse students was outlined in her 1972 article and later refined to develop the concept of culturally responsive teaching. Gay (1972) stated:

Education must be specifically designed to perpetuate and enrich the culture of a people and equip them with the tools to become functional participants in society, if they choose. This education cannot progress smoothly unless it is based upon and proceeds from the cultural perspectives of the group of people for whom it is designed. Since all Americans do not have the same beliefs, attitudes, customs, values, and norms, a single system of education seems impossible to serve everyone .... [Educators] must accept the existence of cultural pluralism in this country and respect differences without equating them with inferiorities or tolerating them with an air of condescension. (p. 35)

Gay (2013) describes culturally responsive teaching as a paradigm needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups. It has the potential to improve multiple kinds of achievement that are beneficial for many different students, although for different reasons and in different ways. Culturally responsive teaching is more about finding solutions to achievement disparities in school than simply casting dispersions on students and teachers.

According to Milner (2010), the student outcomes of pedagogical practices shaped by culturally relevant pedagogy cannot be determined by looking exclusively at students' test score performance. Milner (2010) stated, "Educators who create culturally relevant learning contexts are those who see students' culture as an asset, not a detriment to their success" (p. 69). Milner grounded Ladson-Billing's ideology along with his research to identify three student outcomes related to culturally relevant pedagogy. The three broad categories of student outcomes described include: "culturally relevant pedagogy is empowerment; allows students to see their culture and allows them to

understand the sociopolitical nature of society and how it works” (p. 69-70). Milner (2010) stated, “The outcomes of culturally relevant pedagogy seem to extend far beyond what might be measured on a standardized exam” (p. 69). The notion of utilizing CRP to maximize student engagement is the presumption that guides the current study. Milner (2010) noted the holistic benefits of implementing CRP which stretches far beyond the focus of test scores. Milner (2010) shared the importance of teachers developing knowledge about their students’ cultural background and home lives as a foundation for academic success. Gaining insight on teachers’ perceptions on the influence of these factors on student learning can assist in identifying professional development opportunities to assist classroom teachers.

**Theoretical.** Culturally relevant pedagogy is best described as being a bridge between the home and school cultures for many ethnically diverse students (Howard, 2001a, 2001b).

According to Esposito, Davis & Swain (2011), “Culturally relevant pedagogy is also an alternative to the traditional curriculum and serves as a means of countering the dominant paradigm promoted through the traditional curriculum (p. 243). The culturally relevant approach strives for student academic success and encourages critical consciousness while utilizing “students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 160).

The literature on culturally relevant pedagogy provides a variety of definitions for culturally relevant pedagogy, all of which connect students’ lived experiences to create relevant learning experiences that validate them through the learning process (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2006; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007). Ladson-Billings (1994) asserts that

culturally relevant teaching is designed not only to fit the school culture to the students' cultures, but also to use students' cultures as the basis for helping them understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge. Culturally relevant teaching is based on three notions of outcomes for students: (1) students must attain academic success; (2) students must maintain their own cultural integrity; and (3) students must possess a cultural awareness that avails them of the opportunity to critically examine correlations between beliefs of the dominant social order and their own cultural beliefs and understanding. Ladson-Billings (1994) outlines three propositions regarding self and others, social relations and knowledge that distinguish culturally relevant teaching. The conceptions of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers include: the belief that all students can achieve academic success; seeing themselves as members of the community and teaching as a way of giving back to the community; and viewing their pedagogy as art. Culturally relevant teachers create social interactions to help students meet the criteria of academic success, cultural competence and critical consciousness. This is achieved through: developing a community of learners; maintaining fluid student-teacher relationships; demonstrating a connectedness with all learners and encouraging students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for one another. The ways that culturally relevant teachers conceptualize knowledge include: the belief that knowledge is not static and must be viewed critically; teachers must be passionate about knowledge and learning; teachers must scaffold/build bridges to facilitate learning and assessment must be multifaceted.

According to Milner (2010), although Ladson-Billings outlined three interrelated tenets, the theory has grown, developed and evolved in some important ways. Academic

achievement as Ladson-Billings (2006) first conceptualized it is about student learning and the idea that students will produce the types of outcomes that allow students them to succeed academically. Depending on who is using it and for what purpose, the theory has taken on multiple and varied meanings.

According to Howard (2001), “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 students’ absolute highest potential” (p. 146).

Gay (2000) prefers the term culturally responsive to relevant, and one will find the terms used interchangeably. She asserts that, “Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 29). A culturally responsive approach to teaching helps students of color “maintain identity and connection with their ethnic groups and communities; develop a sense of community, camaraderie, and shared responsibility; and acquire an ethic of success” (p. 30). Gay notes that improving academic achievement is far from the only goal. Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as, “ using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Culturally responsive teaching is: validating; comprehensive; multidimensional; empowering; transformative and emancipatory. It validates students learning by teaching them to know and praise their own cultural heritage as well as others. The incorporation of multicultural materials, resources and information allows students to regard their cultural heritage as valuable and

builds a meaningful connection between home and school. Culturally responsive teachers use a comprehensive approach to teach the whole child. Expectations and skills are “woven together as an integrated whole that permeates all curriculum content and the entire modus operandi of the classroom” (p. 32). “Multidimensional culturally responsive teaching encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, classroom management and performance assessments” (p. 33). Culturally relevant teaching empowers students to be “better human beings and more successful learners” (p. 34). This is achieved by supporting students, providing resources and offering personal assistance to help students attain high levels of academic achievement. The transformative agenda is double-focused. One dimension deals with “confronting and transcending the cultural hegemony nested in much of the curriculum content and classroom instruction of traditional education” (p. 37). The other prepares students to combat forms of oppression and exploitation through developing “social consciousness, intellectual critique and political and personal efficacy” (p. 37). Making “authentic knowledge about different ethnic groups accessible to students” and releasing the “intellect of students of color from constraining manacles of mainstream knowledge and ways of knowing” is liberating (p. 37).

**Empirical.** In Irvine’s (2010) case study of teachers in an urban elementary school, Irvine (2010) discovered that teachers were making positive changes in the curriculum by drawing on their students’ resources and life experiences. Santamaria (2009) also discovered that educators incorporating culturally relevant teaching practices contributed to their school’s success by incorporating differentiated instruction based on academic, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity.

Esposito, Davis & Swain (2011) conducted a phenomenological study to investigate the lived experiences of seven African American teachers with utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy. Esposito, Davis & Swain (2011) found that the underlying similarity among all of the participants' definitions of culturally relevant pedagogy was that CRP could be a route to "empower African American students and help them understand oppression" (p. 245). A theme revealed from Esposito, Davis & Swain's (2011)' data was that the participants saw CRP as a way to empower African American students emotionally and academically. According to Esposito, Davis & Swain (2011), most participants defined CRP similarly and argued that in order to effectively educate African American students, teachers must start with who they are and relate the material to their lives. In addition, Esposito, Davis & Swain (2011) shared that the teachers in the study worked tirelessly to find ways to make connections to students' lives in order to make learning meaningful and to empower them academically.

Milner (2010) investigated how a White science teacher in a diverse urban school was able to build cultural competence in ways that allowed him to more effectively teach his students. Milner (2010) conducted a qualitative research study to gain insight into what struggles the teacher experiences, how the teacher managed his classroom and how the teacher was able to make decisions about learning opportunities for his students. Milner (2010) concluded that the White teacher was able to build cultural congruence with his highly diverse learners because he developed cultural competence and concurrently deepened his knowledge and understanding of himself and his practice. Milner (2010) noted that cultural and racial convergence both are necessary components for academic success. According to Milner (2010), "Teachers can play a critical role in

how students engage, conduct themselves, learn, and achieve in urban classrooms” (p. 88). However, it is important to note Milner’s (2010)’ position as an African American male teacher educator and researcher who is studying a White teacher’s practices. It is important to note the possible implications of Milner’s (2010)’ outsider perspective. The findings of this study were based on the observations and interviews of one middle school teacher.

Milner (2010) discussed the importance of teachers being exposed to the perspectives and insight of other teachers. My study contributes this aspect to the body of literature. The insight from the current study provides elementary teachers with specific data to assist in utilizing CRP to promote student engagement. While Milner’s (2010)’ study gives an account of the experiences of one middle school teacher, the results of the current study gives the perspective of multiple elementary teachers.

Ullucci (2011) explored how successful White teachers of children of color applied culturally relevant practices in their classroom. The qualitative study consisted of six highly effective White teachers in urban setting (Ullucci, 2011). According to Ullucci (2011), the teachers “included a variety of instructional strategies including art, music, games, individual meetings, group projects, and small-group instruction” (p. 401). The teachers’ commitment was described by Ullucci (2011) as more of an overall approach to teaching than a series of actions. Ullucci (2011) encouraged White teachers to understand that they too can be successful with students of color. Ullucci (2011) recommended, “Teachers who are truly invested in being culturally relevant and espousing a diversity-centered education must do so consistently, holistically and with a critical eye” (p. 402).

Ullucci (2011) focused solely on White teachers to explore the ways in which theory was translated into practice in the classroom. Ullucci (2011) justified the selection of White teachers due to the fact that they make up the majority of the teaching force. As a result, comparison cannot be made between the ways White and African American teachers apply cultural relevant practices to teach children of color. Ullucci (2011) contributed to the body of literature by deliberately choosing to focus on two strategies utilized by the participants that are not well documented in the literature. Ullucci (2011) thoroughly described a workshop model of productivity and a focus on “talking the talk” which were the two strategies that were common among the teachers.

According to Ullucci (2011), teachers often overlook culturally relevant pedagogies because they have no frame of reference. My study provides insight into the beliefs held by elementary teachers on culturally relevant pedagogy. Ullucci (2011) warned that teachers cannot consider themselves culturally relevant simply because they enact one component of diversity. This insight from my study provides guidance to help bridge the gap that exists between theory and practice.

Howard (2001b) investigated students’ perceptions and interpretations of culturally responsive teaching practices. The qualitative case study consisted of 17 elementary school students who were taught by four elementary-school teachers who were identified as culturally relevant. According to Howard (2001b), “The students’ characterization of their teachers’ practices were consistent with several of the key principles of culturally relevant pedagogy” (p. 145). The students described the level of comfort that resulted from their teachers’ modes of interaction, methods of communication and overall cultural knowledge (Howard, 2001b). The students conveyed



that their teachers “had a belief in their abilities that previous teachers had not expressed” (Howard, 2001b, p. 146). According to Howard (2001b), “One of the central themes that the students reiterated throughout the study was the myriad of ways in which their academic achievement improved based on their teachers’ pedagogy” (p. 146). Howard (2001b) noted that the finding of the study revealed specific strategies that teachers can use. Based on the data from student interviews, Howard (2001b) shared three suggestions: it is vital for teachers to show concern and caring for their students; a family/community-like classroom should be established and an engaging and stimulating classroom environment should be used to generate enthusiasm and interest about learning.

The research conducted by Howard (2001b) substantiates the need for culturally relevant instructional strategies. Howard’s (2001b)’ use of a qualitative case study was effective in providing insight from the learners’ perspective. The use of four research sites and a purposeful sample of boys and girls increase the validity of the results. However, Howard (2001b) only focused on African American students which limited his findings to only one group of culturally diverse students. Even though all of the teachers and students in the study were African American, Howard (2001b) argued that the results should inform us that effective teaching is not exclusive only to African American students and teachers. The results would have been more convincing if the sample represented a heterogeneous mix of culturally diverse students.

Although the research conducted by Howard (2001b) examined the perceptions of students, it validates the importance of including the voice of sources that have direct knowledge and understanding of culturally relevant instructional practices. While

Howard (2001b) contributes the perspective of elementary school students, I add to the body of literature the perspective of elementary school teachers. Howard (2001b) provided evidence of students conveying their belief that the way the teachers taught helped them to become smarter. This awareness will add an understanding of how students are directly impacted by the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. Insight from teachers on the same topic will give a more comprehensive understanding of the impact CRP has on student engagement and academic achievement.

### **Teacher Perception**

Research suggests that teachers' beliefs have a significant impact on their classroom practice (Thompson, 1992; Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992). Beliefs are generalizations about things such as causality or the meaning of specific actions (Dilts, 1999). Teachers' beliefs are considered to be the indicators of individuals' decisions, choices and behaviors (Uztosun, 2013). Beliefs are seen as the basis of action and understanding teachers' beliefs potentially provide profound insight into several aspects of teacher's professional world (Uztosun, 2013, p. 20). Lortie (2002) noted that teachers form beliefs during their own schooling that create filters through which they process subsequent educational and teaching experiences. Teachers have formed impressions about themselves and their abilities, about the nature of knowledge, and about how learning takes place.

Uztosun (2013) conducted research to explore the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices with reference to the factors leading to consistency and inconsistency between beliefs and practices. Interviews were used to collect data as teachers shared their self-reported practices. According to Uztosun (2013), the study found that teachers' practices were not congruent with their beliefs because all

participants remarked that their opinions about ideal teaching did not match their teaching practices. All participants remarked that they could not provide teaching procedure appropriate to their beliefs (Uztosum, 2013, p. 27).

Devine, Fahie and Gillicuddy (2011) noted that teachers hold a set of complex beliefs about a wide range of professional practices and the people, structures, systems and theoretical paradigms that underpin them. Devine, Fahie and Gillicuddy (2011) added that beliefs can compete with each other and sometimes, act as contradictory discourses which inform and at times, impede effective practice. According to Fives and Buehl (2011), teachers' beliefs act as a filter of both information and experience, framing situations and problems, guiding intention and subsequent action (p. 85). Fives and Buehl (2011) stated that beliefs are intertwined with and core to identities- how teachers understand and define themselves shapes how they understand and define others. Fives and Buehl (2011) noted that an understanding of (dis)congruence between teacher beliefs and teacher practices is critical in researching teacher effectiveness as it underscores the multifaceted and often messy relationship between what teachers *do* and what they *believe*, in contrasting cultural and social contexts.

### **Summary**

Although it is difficult to exclusively define student engagement, the characteristics can be clearly distinguished. The body of literature on student engagement supports the importance of students being engaged in the learning in order to be successful in school. The literature establishes a link between student engagement and academic achievement. The implementation of the Common Core State Standards requires teachers to reflect on their instructional practices and considers which methods

are most effective. As teachers begin to make instructional shifts and seek a teaching approach that is an inclusive model, the insight from the current study serves as a guiding force.

Research surrounding student engagement yields inconsistent conceptualizations of the construct, but consistent evidence about the impact. My study includes the voice of teachers to provide a better understanding of how elementary school teachers conceptualize this construct. Sanders (2003) confirmed that teachers are the single largest factor affecting academic growth of students. His research validates the importance of a study such as mine. Since engagement with academic work is fundamental to students' social and civic development, as well as intellectual achievement, understanding the strategies, structures, and processes that influence student engagement is a basis for research and the formation of programming and policy. Researchers called for more such studies, and suggested that it "could aid in the development of interventions" (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004, p. 59). The body of literature on student engagement validates the need for the current study. By investigating the perceptions of teachers who utilize culturally relevant pedagogy, insight can be gained about this teaching approach.

Chapter Three will provide the research methodology and outline the framework of the research design used in this study. Chapter Four will present the results of data collection, analysis and preparation as outlined in the previous chapter. In conclusion, Chapter Five will focus on presenting the response to the research questions posed in Chapter One, and also provide implications for practice, recommendations for future research and general conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

According to Merriam (1998), qualitative research focuses on process, meaning and understanding and captures the nature and essence of an experience (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research seeks to understand, describe and discover meaning whereas quantitative research focuses on predicting, confirmation and testing hypotheses.

A case study best addresses the research questions and fulfills the purpose of the current study. A case study is described by Creswell (2003) as a qualitative method of providing a detailed analysis and account of a case, event, person or process. Case studies focus on an in-depth analysis of a single case or a group of cases. The purpose of the current study is to explore the perceptions of elementary school teachers at the same school. This chapter provides a description of the research method and design appropriateness. The chapter also includes criteria to select the research site and participant, the sampling and the data collection procedures.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine teacher perception of the extent in which the engagement level of culturally diverse students is impacted by the utilization of culturally relevant teaching strategies and techniques. The qualitative case study consisted of four elementary school teachers at the same research site. Merriam (2009) describes a case study as an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded

system. One of the goals of a case study is to allow the researcher to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Interviews and observations were used to collect data. The intent of the study was to investigate the beliefs and practices of the teachers. The use of qualitative research provided a framework to interpret the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine teacher perception of the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement. As stated in Chapter 1, this research study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do elementary teachers at Seventh Grove Elementary School define culturally relevant pedagogy and student engagement?
2. What are the teachers' assumptions and perceptions of the ways in which their instructional strategies impact student engagement?
3. In what ways do teachers' beliefs about culturally relevant pedagogy and student engagement inform their practice?

### **Research Design and Approach**

For the purpose of this case study, qualitative research was used to explore teacher perception of the ways in which culturally relevant pedagogy impacts the engagement of culturally diverse students. A case study design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of culturally relevant teaching strategies. "A case study might be selected for its uniqueness, for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to" (Merriam, p. 33, 1998). A qualitative research method and design was appropriate to the study because the purpose is to examine teachers' thoughts and feelings. Patton (1990) explained that what would be

“bias” and considered a weakness in statistical sampling, becomes intended focus and considered strength in qualitative sampling. The case study produces the type of concrete, context-dependent knowledge that research on learning shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts (Denzin, 2005) The main strength of the case study is depth-detail, richness, completeness, and within-case variance- whereas for statistical methods it is breadth. Another key strength is the use of multiple sources and techniques in the data collection process.

The focus of the current study was on teacher perception. The main task of qualitative research is to “explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 7). Utilizing a qualitative design allowed the researcher to understand and document the perceptions of elementary school teachers on the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Researchers are a critical component of the research process. In qualitative research, the researcher focuses on questioning and understanding the meaning and interpretation of the phenomena (Ali &Yusof, 2011). The researcher fulfills the role of the primary instrument by collecting and analyzing data. Patton (2002) stated, “The principle is to report any personal and professional information that may have affected data collection, analysis and interpretation either negatively or positively (p. 566). The approach and theoretical lens employed by the researcher can elicit the true essence of an experience. “Data are mediated through this human instrument, the researcher, rather than through some inanimate inventory, questionnaire, or computer” (Marriam, 1998, p. 7).

The goal of qualitative research is to discover meaning. The researcher will determine the best type of research that yields a final product that is “richly descriptive” and provides meaning and understanding. The purpose of the study determines the types of questions appropriate for this type of inquiry. For the current study, the questions asked by the researcher should evoke responses which provide insight into the thoughts, perceptions and feelings of the participants. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Marriam, 1998, p. 6). The researcher’s role throughout the study will be to enhance and ensure credibility in data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting within the study. A conscious effort will be made to remove all personal biases and prejudices while collecting documenting, analyzing and processing all information. The researcher will make the biases, assumptions and perspective clear to the reader as well as the plan to deal with these potential threats to the validity of the study. The researcher will work to increase credibility and trustworthiness in the current study through the use of triangulation, clarification of researcher bias, member checking and the use of rich, thick description (Glesne, 2011).

### **Researcher Subjectivity and Positionality**

As an educator, I am aware of the emphasis placed on identifying ways to improve academic achievement. My academic background and experience as a teacher has helped me to understand the importance of student engagement. Based on my observations and what is noted in the literature, students who are actively involved and engaged in the learning process are more likely to perform well academically. Based on the knowledge I have attained through the literature, I framed what I understand about



culturally relevant pedagogy to investigate the impact this approach has on student learning and engagement.

I am a fourth grade teacher and in relation to my participants, I am a former member of their learning community. I have an existing relationship with all of the participants and I have team taught with three of the participants. My assumption is that all of the participants will view me as an insider, which will provide a sense of comfort to have open and honest dialogue during the interview and focus group. My knowledge of the community will allow me to remain sensitive even while asking critical questions. My insider status will allow me fulfill my role as a researcher and obtain firsthand knowledge that reflects the feelings and perspectives of students.

I utilized the various tools and methods to monitor the impact of my subjectivity and positionality. I used Milner's framework to guide my research and consider the seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers. I monitored my feelings throughout the process and paid special attention to the positive and negative feelings and reactions that were evoked. I also spent time reflecting on myself as a researcher and the feelings, experiences and knowledge that make me who I am and how each aspect works collectively to frame my role as a researcher.

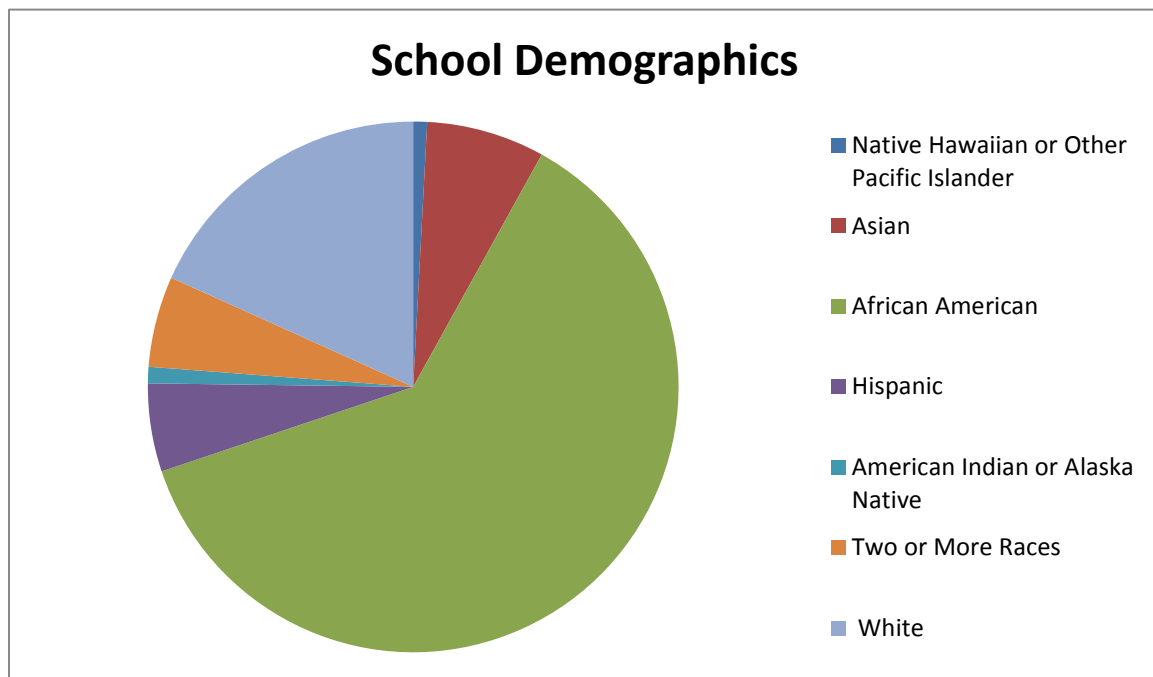
My study was strengthened by the skills and knowledge that I possess. My knowledge of the participants and experience teaching in the setting are both assets. There are also limitations that occurred as of result of my role as the researcher. While my gender may have worked to my advantage since all of my participants are female, it is important to note the racial difference that exists between the participants and myself. My

role as an African American researcher, investigating culturally relevant teaching strategies, may have had an impact on the responses given by the participants.

### Context of Study

The research was conducted at one school in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the teacher perception within the setting. Selecting settings and individuals that provide the information needed to answer the research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative selection decisions (Maxwell, 2005). The goal of purposeful sampling is explained by Patton (1990) as yielding insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations.

Seventh Grove Elementary is an urban school. The school population is approximately 597 students.



*Figure 3.1. School Demographics.*

The demographics are unique because the teachers at the school are all White females.

The faculty and staff demographics are not similar to the student population. The school

has performed well on standardized tests. The school is classified as a Title I School, but the academic achievement of the students always exceeds that of students who attend schools with a similar population.

### **Ethical Protection**

All Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol and procedures were followed to ensure the protection of each individual participant. Ethical considerations guided every aspect of the research process and every interaction with the participants. Each participant was given a letter stating the purpose of the qualitative case study and informing him/her that participation in the study is voluntary, anonymous and confidential. All teachers who participated in this research study were required to sign an IRB approved consent form. According to Glesne (2011), participants have the right to expect that their confidences will be protected and their anonymity will be preserved. During interviews and observations, the researcher respected the confidentiality of the participants by not discussing what was seen or heard during the research process. All responses were coded for confidentiality. Glesne (2011) recommended the use of fictitious names and changing descriptive characteristics such as age or hair color to protect the anonymity of research participants. As a measure to protect the privacy of those involved in the study, pseudonyms were used for each participant. To protect the confidentiality of the data and participants during group sessions, Patton (2002)'s "Ethical Issues Checklist" will be used. According to Patton (2002), the following ten items should be considered when engaging in qualitative research: explaining the purpose of the inquiry and methods to be used; promises and reciprocity; risk assessment; confidentiality; informed consent; data access and ownership; interviewer mental health;

advice; data collection boundaries and ethical versus legal conduct. Each participant was required to sign a confidentiality agreement before participating in the focus group.

Glesne (2011) suggested allowing research participants to read and discuss the representation before it goes to the wider public. I provided this opportunity to all of the participants. The data collected during this study will be stored so that only the researcher has access to it.

### **Participant Selection**

According to Patton (1990), there are no rules for the sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on the purpose of the inquiry, what you want to know, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done with available time and resources (Patton, 1990). Selection for the current study consisted of a convenience sample of elementary school teachers. A convenience sample is a non-probability sampling technique that is commonly used because of the accessibility of the audience or sample to the researcher (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher used a convenience sample in this study because of accessibility to the participants and the research site. The convenience sample for the current study consisted of four teachers; one third grade teacher, two fourth grade teachers and one fifth grade teacher. All participants were female elementary school teachers who taught third, fourth or fifth grade at the same research site. The teachers were selected to represent different ages, years of experience and grade levels.

The demographic break down of the participants is presented in Table 3.1 below:

Table 3.1. Participant Demographics

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Teaching Experience (Years)</b>	<b>Current Grade Level</b>	<b>Number of School Settings</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	Female	White	37	5 <sup>th</sup>	2
<b>Participant 2</b>	Female	White	12	3 <sup>rd</sup>	3
<b>Participant 3</b>	Female	White	7	4 <sup>th</sup>	1
<b>Participant 4</b>	Female	White	10	4 <sup>th</sup>	3

Formal letters describing the purpose of the study were distributed to third, fourth and fifth grade teachers. After the participants were selected, the researcher met with the group to provide information about the study. The researcher fostered a relationship with the participants by being respectful, nonjudgmental and non-threatening (Merriam, 2009). Regular communication was maintained between the researcher and the participants throughout the course of the current study.

### **Participants' Interviews and Profiles**

Data collection began in January 2015 with an initial face-to-face meeting with each participant. The purpose of the study and research plan was explained to the participants before data collection began. Participants were told that the purpose of the research was to obtain their thoughts and beliefs about student engagements and explore their understanding of culturally relevant teaching and the impact on students. Face-to-

face interviews and observations were completed in early February. Interviews were scheduled based on the availability of each participant and took place in a private setting chosen by the participant. The interview length varied from teacher to teacher but lasted an average of one hour for each participant.

Participant 1 is a fifth grade teacher. The interview took place in her classroom during the time that she designated as being most convenient. Her classroom door was closed to minimize distractions and ensure an uninterrupted interview. Participant 1 has been teaching the fifth grade at Seventh Grove for over thirty years. She has experienced the demographic changes first hand as Seventh Grove Elementary transformed from mostly White to a very diverse, mostly minority population.

Participant 2 was interviewed in her classroom during her planning period. Participant 2 is currently a third grade teacher at Seventh Grove Elementary. She has also worked as a math interventionist and fourth grade teacher at the present school. She enjoys teaching the third grade but she has contemplated leaving Seventh Grove for the last two years. Her long commute combined with the frustrations associated with the lack of administrative support often causes her to consider the advantages of teaching in a different setting.

Participant 3 was interviewed in her classroom during her planning period. Participant has spent her entire career teaching fourth grade at Seventh Grove Elementary. She started began her career with excitement and love for teaching. Over the course of the last five years, she has become extremely frustrated with the lack of administrative support, especially in the area of discipline. She interviewed at two schools last year in hopes of transferring within the school district. Her extreme

frustrations also led her to interview for a position as a pharmaceutical sales representative. Upon realization that she would have to return to Seventh Grove, she decided to make the best of the situation.

The researcher interviewed Participant 4 in her classroom during her planning period. Participant 4 spent the first year of her teaching career in North Carolina as a fifth grade teacher. She currently teaches fourth grade at Seventh Grove Elementary. She taught fifth grade for one year and all of her other years have been spent teaching fourth. Participant 4 does not have a positive attitude about teaching. She has a master's degree in library science and has attempted to transfer within the district to obtain a position as a librarian. She has also applied for positions in another district in the area. She exhibited the signs of a teacher who is just going through the motions each day but not feeling truly fulfilled.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative interview questions and observations were used to collect data. An interview protocol was used to conduct one-on-one interviews. The interview protocol questions were based on theory and literature which guided the interviews. The questions were designed with the intent of capturing teacher perception on the impact of their teaching practices on student engagement. The purpose of the data collection in qualitative studies is for the researcher to develop themes and patterns, carried throughout the data collection (Pringle et al., 2011). For this case study, multiple sources of evidence were collected to gain a greater understanding of how teachers perceive the impact culturally relevant has on student engagement. These sources included: individual interviews, classroom observations, and relevant artifacts.

**Individual interviews.** The researcher used a semi-structured, open-ended Interview Protocol for the interviews. An interview protocol was developed based on theory and literature which guided the interviews. The open-ended approach allows some structure, but also, gives room for flexibility. Using this form also allowed responses that the researcher had not anticipated. An iPad and an iPhone were used to record the interviews. A journal was used to record the responses.

Participants were interviewed one-on-one for an hour and were observed for thirty minutes. Conducting interviews provided an opportunity to have purposeful conversations with the participants to obtain a special kind of information (Merriam, 1998). The researcher wanted the dialogue to flow naturally, allowing participants to share their thoughts and beliefs in a relaxing, non-threatening and non-judgmental environment.

**Classroom observations.** The researcher's role was as a non-participant observer in the classroom in order to avoid creating distraction or deviation from the regular routine and activities in the class. In addition, the researcher did not want to be distracted during the observation of the classroom practice. To help in eliminating this, the researcher explained to the participants that the intent was not to distract nor be distracted and asked her to introduce the researcher as a classroom observer and not a classroom aide or assistant. If students did ask the researcher questions, it was handled in a professional way on an individual basis. Paper and pen were used to record observations. The goal of the researcher was to be discrete and nondisruptive as possible. Each participant was interviewed once for a thirty-minute block of time.



**Artifacts.** To better understand how the participants' beliefs affect their instructional planning; the researcher collected teachers' lesson plans and compared them with the responses from teacher interviews and observations.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers and investigators must monitor their own analytical procedures and processes as truthfully and fully as possible (Patton, 2006). Data analysis was done during data collection as well after the data collection process. During data collection, the researcher consistently reflected on the data and wrote memos. The use of memos allowed the researcher to capture the analytical thoughts as they occurred (Glesne, 2011). Writing memos required the researcher to think about the work and provided a record of thoughts to incorporate into the first draft.

Data analysis consisted of text analysis, describing information, developing themes, and situating findings within a larger meaning (Creswell, 2012). As recommended by Creswell (2007), transcripts were read several times to get an overall feeling of the transcript. Significant sentences and phrases directly related to the teachers' lived experiences were identified from which meanings were then formulated and clustered into themes. The researcher identified common themes among all participants and a review of all common themes across each interview was conducted to identify emergent themes among all participants. Coding was utilized to identify and describe themes and patterns from the perspective of the participants. The codes were developed through the emergent themes on participants' perceptions of student engagement and culturally relevant pedagogy and grouped accordingly. The researcher achieved triangulation through the use of multiple data collection methods. Interviews,

observations and lesson plans were utilized to collect data and gain an understanding of teacher perception. The researcher met with the participants and went over the transcripts to ensure that their thoughts, feelings and perceptions were accurately captured.

Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data collection methods. Member checking will also be used. Each participant was given a copy of the interview transcript and given an opportunity to provide any additional information or feedback relevant to the study. Member checking was utilized to ensure the accurate representation of the participants' thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

The researcher began coding the data by identifying common themes used by participants to describe classroom experiences and overall perceptions related to the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher sought to develop codes that showed the relationship between culturally relevant teaching strategies and student engagement. The researcher then looked for patterns that existed between third, fourth and fifth grade teachers' experiences of utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy as well as the patterns that the participants articulate about the impact on student engagement. These methods of data analysis were applied to determine the teachers' perceptions of student engagement, culturally relevant pedagogy and the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement.

## **Summary**

For the purpose of this qualitative study, the researcher utilized a qualitative approach to capture the perceptions of the participants. The use of a qualitative research paradigm allowed the researcher to describe the lived experiences of the participants to gain insight about the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement.

Interview questions, an observation and lesson plans were used to triangulate the data and add to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. Chapter Three provided the research methodology and outlined the framework of the research design used in this study. Chapter Four will present the results of data collection, analysis and preparation as outlined in the previous chapter. In conclusion, Chapter Five will focus on presenting the response to the research questions posed in Chapter One, and also provide implications for practice, recommendations for future research and general conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

The purpose of the qualitative case study was to investigate the teachers' beliefs on the ways in which their strategies impact the level of student engagement and gain insight into their perceptions on student engagement and culturally relevant teaching. The study explored instructional strategies utilized by four elementary school teachers and determined if the strategies were culturally relevant based on the theory. Participants shared their thoughts and beliefs about student engagement as well as the impact of their instructional choices on student engagement and students' attitudes about learning. The participants provided their personal thoughts on culturally relevant pedagogy, their ability to implement culturally relevant strategies and their perception of the effectiveness of the strategies on culturally diverse

The first four questions were designed to gain insight into the background, experiences and influences that have shaped the beliefs and instructional practices of the participants. Question 1 asked participants to tell if there were particular people or experiences that influenced their choice to become a teacher. A theme emerged from the responses of Participant 2 and Participant 3. Both were inspired to enter the teaching profession by former teachers. Participant 3 loved her fifth grade teacher.

I always knew that I wanted to be like her when I grew up. This very same teacher is now a long-term sub at my school. I liked all of my teachers. My mom was a teacher and I always respected teachers. I do not remember ever not wanting to be a teacher. (Participant 3)

Participant 2 shared the experience of her sixth grade teacher helping her find books which in turn changed her feelings about reading from hate into love.

My sixth grade teacher helped me find books and caused me to love and want to read. She gave us this book to read and I didn't like it, and I just wouldn't read it. And then so she said, "Well let's find a book that you would be interested in reading". So she found a book that I was interested in reading, and then helped me find more books that I was really interested in reading. And so then I actually started loving to read. When I became a teacher, I wanted to find something that would interest the kids, in some subject area and make them want to know more for whatever subject area it was that they were struggling in or just had a dislike for. (Participant 2)

Participant 1 and Participant 3 both shared that previous experience/work with children is what led them into the teaching profession. Participant 1 shared that she worked at a daycare in high school and thought that she would enjoy working with children in future. Participant 3 shared her experience of growing up in an era where she babysat.

I babysat all of the time, starting at 11. I felt that teaching was the natural order of things. I think because I had just always assumed that's what I would do. I worked with children I feel like my whole life. I was the oldest sister and the oldest cousin. I was always babysitting and then really that was my job to make money through junior high and high school. I did a lot of babysitting and just always worked with children. And a friend of mine and I in high school, in the summers ran what we called "summer learning camps" in our homes. And I guess in modern terms we would call that some daycare for some parents, but we planned learning activities for the kids. And so it just led right into that. (Participant 3)

### **Definition of Student Engagement**

The first research question asked, "How do elementary teachers at Seventh Grove Elementary School define culturally relevant pedagogy and student engagement?" Interview Questions 5, 6, and 7 were utilized to gain an understanding of how the participants defined student engagement and articulate their beliefs about the ways in

which their instructional decisions impact the attitudes about learning and engagement level of students. Teachers defined student engagement in these ways: students being actively involved in their own learning and taking responsibility; students actively involved and participating in the lesson by asking and answering questions; students are focused on what is being learned in class; students participating, taking part and learning knowledge on a topic. A common theme that emerged as participants defined this term was the description of students being actively involved, participating and focusing on the learning.

Students are involved, actively participating in the lesson, asking questions, answering questions, encouraging other students, and maybe piggybacking off of what others have said. (Participant 2)

Students being actively involved in their own learning and taking responsibility for their learning. (Participant 1)

When students are actually participating and taking part and they're learning knowledge on a topic. (Participant 4)

Research has outlined student engagement as a multi-faceted construct. A broad definition of student engagement is defined as student participation in school as evidenced by time-on-task, positive attitudes, interest, and investment in learning (Reeve, 2006). In the current study, student engagement was defined by the participants' overwhelmingly the belief that engaged students exhibit certain behaviors that reflect interest in the content and time-on-task. Question 5 from the interview protocol asked participants to share an example from their practice to illustrate their definition of student engagement. All of the examples shared by the participants included student actions that illustrated an active role in the instruction. Participant 1 and 2 shared insight that indicated a belief that the way student engagement looks is determined by the mode of instruction. The participants shared that during a class discussion, engagement would be

evident by students listening and raising their hand to ask and answer questions. Students collaborating, working together on hands-on activities and using technology were all shared as examples of instances when students were engaged. The examples shared by three of the four participants focused on the student behavior, not the instructional strategy utilized by the teacher. Participant 3 shared insight by explaining an experience where students asked for more direction and showed an interest in going above and beyond on a technology project.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Question 7 of the interview protocol was used to explore teacher perception of culturally relevant pedagogy. The participants were asked to share what they knew about culturally relevant pedagogy and define the term. They each shared slightly different perspectives. One participant was very forthright in admitting that she really did not know much about the term. She connected the term to what she learned about cultural competence while attending a cultural diversity focused training. The training was hosted by the Donna Elam Institution out of Florida and was a requirement of a grant that her school received through the Office of Civil Rights.

Being aware of cultural diversity, especially backgrounds and etc., to make education relevant for all cultures. (Participant 1)

Another participant explained what she knew in very simplistic terms. She connected what she knew about culturally relevant pedagogy to the strategies used by the ESOL teacher in the school.

What I know about culturally relevant pedagogy is the ESOL teacher using pictures and picture books to activate background knowledge. (Participant 4)

Participant 4 expounded on her thought and her perceived challenges when asked to share what she knew about culturally relevant pedagogy.

You want to teach in a way that students understand and relate to what you are teaching. It can be challenging because you don't want to deviate from the standards but you want to be sensitive and respectful of different countries and races. Making learning relevant to all students can be difficult, especially when the teacher does not have the background knowledge. The ways that culture is tied in depends on how diverse the classroom is. (Participant 3)

Participant 2 shared that she associated the term culture with the term culturally relevant pedagogy.

I think that culturally relevant pedagogy is showing an awareness of the different cultures that are in your class and teaching to the cultures that are in your class. (Participant 2)

Ladson-Billings (1994) asserts that culturally relevant teaching is designed not only to fit the school culture to the students' cultures, but also to use students' cultures as the basis for helping them understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge. Culturally relevant teaching is based on three notions regarding student outcomes: (1) students must attain academic success; (2) students must maintain their own cultural integrity; and (3) students must possess a cultural awareness that avails them of the opportunity to critically examine correlations between beliefs of the dominant social order and their own cultural beliefs and understanding. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant pedagogy is

Instruction as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right (p. 17-18).

The definitions provided by the participants in the current study were very similar to each other. The definitions shared by the participants touched the surface of culturally



relevant teaching and indicated a very basic understanding of term. Participant 4 had background knowledge on the term cultural competence as a result of a diversity training session she had attended. Her definition expressed her belief in the importance of making learning relevant for all students, which aligns with the basis of the theory. She defined the theory in a way that shows an understanding of the importance of using culture to conceptualize knowledge.

At the center of culturally relevant teaching is the culture of the learner (Ladson-Billings, 1994). When defining the theory, participants showed an awareness of culture as an integral part of the theory. Their definition did not include evidence of the three tenants of culturally relevant pedagogy.

### **Impact of Instructional Strategies**

The second research question asked, “What are the teachers’ assumptions and perceptions of the ways in which their instructional strategies impact student engagement?” To address this question, interview responses and transcripts were analyzed to determine the beliefs about student engagement and the connections that were made between instructional practices and student engagement. The researcher read and analyzed each individual transcript several times line-by-line in an effort to identify any emergent categories, themes, and patterns for the initial coding phase of the analysis. As the researcher read and reread the data, an initial list of codes was identified and developed. The code “actively involved/engaged” was developed for the description and examples of student behavior that the participants used to describe student engagement. The code “making learning relevant” was given to the strategies that teachers described as their ways to make learning relevant. “Strategies that increase student engagement”

was given to the specific strategies and types of lessons that teachers described as increasing student engagement. The teachers shared stories and reasons why they entered the teaching professions. The stories and reasons were coded as “influence/motivation for teaching.” After the initial round of coding was complete, the list was studied and new codes were added based on ideas and themes that emerged from the data. Two additional codes included “teacher role” and “student role” as it relates to the responsibility for learning. When teachers were asked to share their beliefs about the use of culturally relevant strategies and the impact of the strategies, the “benefits of culturally relevant strategies” code was developed based on the responses. The researcher’s goal was to unveil themes and patterns that existed among the participants. After working with the data at length and adding new codes, similarities and differences were compared. The similarities and differences were used to determine patterns. The teachers were asked questions to capture their thoughts and beliefs about the responsibility of the teacher and the student as it relates to student engagement. Question 6 asked participants to share their beliefs on the impact that their instructional strategies have on student engagement. Three of the participants believed that the type of material and the way that it is presented has an impact on the level of student engagement.

Well I think what I do determines how actively engaged they are. (Participant 2)

What I choose to do each day in my lessons is going to greatly impact whether the students are engaged or not. (Participant 3)

I think you have to keep in mind how to best hook them and get them involved.  
(Participant 1)

One participant expressed strong beliefs about varying instruction between whole group and small group.

Sometimes you might have whole group instruction. Depending on the topic and the students. It could be small group or individual instruction. Whatever you need to do to insure that they're really understanding or that they get the material that you want them to get. I think you need to vary whatever you do. Plan the engagement to fit the activity as well as the students. (Participant 1)

One participant believed that the use of technology could promote engagement and that traditional methods of teaching allow teachers an opportunity to better gauge whether or not a student is engaged.

Certain technology sites or strategies that I use promote more engagement or promote the illusion of more engagement. (Participant 4)

Two participants felt that flexibility was very important. They both believed that in order to be effective, teachers cannot get stuck in a routine.

I think a lot has to do with not getting stuck in a routine, keeping your schedule, and keeping your routines as far as times and structure. So the students understand what's going to be done, but not every lesson and every day is exactly the same and that as a teacher you have to introduce different ways of learning so that you can hit more students to keep them engaged every day. (Participant 3)

The participants all seemed to make a connection between their instructional choices and the impact it has on student engagement.

Question 7 asked participants to share examples of specific strategies that increase student engagement. Participants were asked to share examples from their practice that aligned with their definition of student engagement. Three participants shared specific examples of instances where technology was utilized.

Students use Edmodo to respond to prompts, answer questions and take tests. (Participant 2)

Recently when using technology, students asked for more direction on what to do instead of having to tell them. They were engaged and wanted to dig deeper without me having to tell them or make them be involved. They asked what more they could do and wanted to go above and beyond (Participant 3).

When students use technology they look more engaged, but who knows if they really are. They seem to be engaged when doing group work (Participant 4).

One participant described an example of engagement during whole group instruction.

If it is purely instruction, students are engaged in listening, participating, collaborating or hand-on activities. (Participant 1)

Overall, the participants believed that certain types of lessons lead to more engagement. Participants shared that students are more engaged when participating in hands-on activities, particularly in math and science. I assumed that a common theme among all of the teachers would be that the use of technology would lead to higher levels of student engagement. Since this is the first year of the full implementation of the MEDIA Magnet Program at the research site, I figured that all of the teachers would be focusing on technology to create meaningful learning experiences. Two participants specifically discussed the use of technology.

For vocabulary or writing, a lot of times if you can use a site or an app they are more apt to try and get started with it right away instead of wasting time. (Participant 4)

At our school we've had such a big push with technology and I think definitely that's one factor that you can pull into a lot of everyday lessons that helps to teach kids on something that they can relate to and that they can enjoy doing because that's just so much a part of their world right now, and they're growing up in a very technology advanced world. I think using various forms of technology to teach kind of the same things that we've been doing helps to engage them; gives them a different way to look at the same information. (Participant 3)

Two participants shared their belief that student engagement is higher when students participate in hands-on activities.

When it's more of a hands-on or solving a problem or working something out or participating in a readers theatre or something like that, they're more engaged and actually more into the lesson. Science experiments, maybe solving some type of

puzzle or putting together a timeline, creating a project or a drawing that might illustrate a time period in South Carolina history (Participant 2)

For science, hand-on definitely and math, using manipulatives increases engagement and understanding. (Participant 4)

One teacher shared her firm belief that allowing students to have ownership and take responsibility for their learning has the greatest impact on student engagement.

I think if you can put the ball in their court. If they feel like they take ownership. Even if it is in an introduction of a lesson, a skill, or an activity. If you can put it on them, where they have to be really, really involved in some way. When you can put it in their court, and they have to come back to you with things that they feel like they've found out and they've searched out. I think that works a little bit better than just presenting something to them. Having something kind of a pre-lesson activity where they're involved and you can put it on them. (Participant 1)

The participants in the current study make a clear connection between their instructional practices and student engagement. The findings clearly show that the participants understand the importance of their role in making decisions that impact the engagement levels of their students. The participants shared a strong belief in the importance of the teacher role in regards to student engagement. As a group, the participants agreed that planning engaging activities and having a willingness to try different ways of teaching is an important responsibility of the teacher. Participants also agreed that the implementation of different strategies should be intentional and flow in a natural way during instruction.

A common theme that emerged was the belief that teachers have to be able to monitor and adjust in order to best meet the needs of their students. Three of the teachers expressed the belief in being flexible in choosing their strategies and instructional setting to deliver instruction.

The participants were asked to share their beliefs about whether or not students are solely responsible for being engaged. Two participants agreed that students are not solely responsible for being on task. Participant 1 described herself as the older teacher of the group and went on to say:

Teachers have to try different things to see what works best for each child. Variety is needed for students to explore different ways and understand how they learn the best. Sometimes you have to show different ways and means so they become engaged in different things. (Participant 1)

Participant 2 shared that she partially places the responsibility on the student but not completely.

Part of the teacher's job is to plan lessons to get students interested in the topic. Depends on what I planned. If students did not seem engaged, next time I will try to find something more engaging. Students do have to be responsible because everything can't be high energy. (Participant 2)

Participant 4 was very straight forward in placing the responsibility on the student.

It is their learning. Stuff is not always going to be interesting. It is their job as a student regardless. It is their job. (Participant 4)

Participant 4 added that she questions the student's behavior first instead of questioning her planning.

I question why they are not doing what they are supposed to be doing. Is there something that they need help to do what they are supposed to be doing? (Participant 4)

Participant 3 shared that teachers should not expect students to come in excited but should think of ways to get them excited.

Especially as students get older, they get disengaged from school. It is the teacher's responsibility to think of ways to get their students involved in the learning. Always try to think of what is fun to the students and what they can relate to. For example, using Chromebooks and iPads versus the textbook. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 went on to share her reflective way of thinking. She shared that in the moment, she may first blame the student for being disengaged but as any good teacher she takes time and reflects.

If it happens one day or one time, I am more likely to blame the student. If it happens multiple times or with multiple students, I begin to think about what I can do differently. If it happens often or with the majority of the students, I really begin to wonder what I can do differently. (Participant 3)

The attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to implement cultural relevant pedagogy effectively are the product of study, practical experience, and reflective self-analysis (McGee-Banks, 1997). Reflective self-analysis requires educators to identify, examine, and reflect upon their attitudes toward different cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, and social-class groups. Three of the four participants clearly display characteristics of having a reflective nature. They are willing to reflect on their practices and move forward using the path that is most beneficial for their students. It is evident that they are committed to the success of their students. I believe that if the teachers were provided the necessary training, they would embrace the Participant 4 did not seem to see the value in culturally relevant pedagogy. She subscribed to a colorblind approach to teaching. She mentioned several times during the interview that she does not base any of her decisions on the color of the students.

### **Teacher Perception**

The third research question asked, “In what ways does teacher perception inform practice?” In order to address this question, a triangulated research design of interviews, direct observation, and the collection of lesson plans was employed. The researcher asked interview questions to determine the beliefs of the participants. Direct observations were conducted to determine if classroom practices reflected their stated beliefs. Lesson

plans were reviewed to determine the type of planning used and if the type of planning aligns with observed classroom practices.

**Participant 1.** Participant 1 provided a very detailed lesson plan which displayed clear evidence of intentional planning. The lesson began with Daily Oral Language. The teacher used 5 sentences to review subject and object pronouns. She was intentional in her use of sentences that students could relate to. She connected the sentences to the Country Western Celebration that the school had celebrated earlier that morning. The classroom was very quiet and students raised their hands to answer questions. As one student attempted to answer a question, she used encouraging language as he was processing his thoughts. “He’s thinking. He’s got it.” She moved on to another student when she realized that he could not produce the answer. She began the persuasive writing lesson by giving the students a tool to remember the parts that need to be included in their writing. She used the acronym OREO help students to remember to include their opinion, reasons, examples/explanations and restate their opinion. She set the expectation for wanting to see higher level sentences in the writing. She reviewed the structure of creating sentences using an introductory word or phrase and then a comma. She asked one student a question and when he could not produce an answer she said, “That means you need to tune in to what I’m teaching.” As she worked one on one with a student, she complimented her in front of the whole class. “Nayla came to us with a good writing background.” She walked around the room and conferences with different students. She looked at the writing to check for higher level sentences. She spent a substantial amount of time with the student from Nigeria.



There were four students with their heads on the desk. I noticed a White boy on the front row who made loud yawning noises and there was a Black student on the back row who had down often.

The patterns that emerged during her interview included three strong beliefs: students should be given ownership; planning instruction and all students should feel like they are part of the learning. Her beliefs align with the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. As described in the literature, culturally relevant pedagogy empowers teachers to teachers to teach in ways that help all students understand and relate to the content. Based on the interview, Participant 1 is committed to planning lessons that provide meaningful learning experiences. Culturally relevant pedagogy enhances the learning experience for all students, which is also what Participant 1 seems to set as her focus. Her planning aligned with the practice observed in the classroom. It was evident during the observation that she set high expectations for all of her students, which also aligns with culturally relevant pedagogy. Her lesson plans stated her expectation for and this was evident during instruction. The language that she used was affirming and she used praise and compliments to build-up her students and offer meaningful feedback is the key- culturally relevant strategies should be chosen based on the how naturally they can be fit into.

**Participant 2.** Participant 2 provided a typed lesson plan on the day of the observation. Students were seated in groups of four. The participant taught the lesson from the front of the classroom. Before beginning the lesson, the participant addressed a student with his head on the desk. She said to him, “Sit up, heads off of your arm.” The participant started the math lesson by focusing on the use of the Guess and Check

strategy to solve problems. The participant asked questions as they worked through the problem. The participant did not require students to raise their hands as they answered questions. The participant modeled the problem solving process for students as they worked on the problem and asked/answered questions. One student continues to blurt out as another agrees with his answer, “That’s what I was thinking.” The teacher calls her name in a non-threatening way. After the participant guided students through the word problem, students write a sentence to explain their answer.

The participant passed out iPads for students to use during the next part of the lesson. This was the first time the students used the iPad minis. They usually use ChromeBooks. The excitement was obvious. Comments such as “Cool” and the smiles on their faces showed their feelings and anticipation. Unfortunately, the attempt to use the Nearpod program was unsuccessful. The students were disappointed but adjusted well to the change. Had the program worked appropriately, students would have been able to do work and hit send to allow the teacher to see their work on her screen. They attempted to use the ChromeBook for the activity, but plan presented challenges also. The teacher then had everyone close their device so the activity could be completed together as a class. At this point, many of the students were clearly disappointed. Many of them began to make sounds and show nonverbal gestures of displeasure.

Participant 2 shared the belief that the type of material and the way it is presented has an impact on learning. This teacher’s approach to utilizing culturally relevant strategies includes video clips and different types of read-alouds. Culturally relevant teachers do not depend on textbooks or state curriculum frameworks to decide what or how to teach (Ladson-Billings, 1995). She believes that it makes instruction stronger,

catches their attention and helps them remember the topic she is trying to get across. The use of read-alouds, songs, poems and reader's theaters is noted in the body of research on culturally relevant pedagogy as teaching resources. Her lesson plan provided an outline for the observation.

**Participant 3.** The walls of the classroom environment were decorated with posters about fractions and charts with explanations of how to complete different mathematical computations. The students were seated in horizontal rows which formed groups of four to five desks. The participant began the lesson by going over homework from the previous night. The direct instruction led by the participant focused on using benchmark fractions. Students raised their hands and answered questions as they used their pens to check their homework problems. A number line was used to assist students who were having trouble with equivalent fractions. The teacher led the discussion by asking the students questions such as: "Give me the symbol that you put between these two fractions, please?" "How can you prove that?" "How do you know?" While noting the respectful nature of the language used by the participant, it was also obvious that she wanted students to be able to explain how they arrived at their answers. She stretched their thinking beyond simply giving an answer. I noticed an African American male on the back row playing with his pencil. He was reminded to get on task by the math interventionist who was present during the lesson. Within a few minutes, he began to play with his pencil again. He began to stand up on the back row. The teacher asked him a question, possibly in an effort to help him to regain focus. He answered the question correctly and explained his answer. He continued to stand up for a few minutes and then he sat down. He did not raise his hand when he answered the next question that was

asked by the teacher. He then asked a question about the ways to compare fractions and then he answered another question. During the math, there were three students who briefly had their heads on the desk, two African American girls and one Asian girl.

The participant then transitioned to get her students ready for the Science Trivia Test and to copy the new trivia. She began to give table points to groups of students who were being responsible and copying trivia. There was one student who was taking a while to get started. Another student asked him, “You need help?” The students were very helpful to each other. The majority of the students were focused on copying the trivia questions and answers.

Participant 3’s interview responses showed that she takes her responsibility as a teacher very seriously. She is cognizant of always trying to think of what students can relate to and tries to think of ways to get them excited. Her perspective on planning and instruction aligns with the beliefs of culturally relevant pedagogy. She is empowered to teach in a way that students can understand and relate to. She is also very committed to enhancing the learning experience of all of her students. During the observation, she was very aware of the level of understanding exhibited by her students. When she sensed that students did not understand the strategy that she was using to review fractions, she quickly transitioned to another strategy and used a math manipulative as a model.

**Participant 4.** The classroom environment was the participant’s classroom. The night before the scheduled observation, the participant sent an email to inform the researcher that the media specialist would be teaching during the scheduled observation. She indicated that she would be present and that she would be helping out during the lesson. The short notice did not allow the flexibility of rescheduling the observation. The

media specialist taught the majority of the lesson. There was one student who opened his Chromebook before he was given permission to start. The participant took away his device and it was not returned at any point of the observation. The lesson focused on how use the library's website. The participant asked students to give her a thumbs-up if they could get to page. Once the students got on the page, she asked questions to review the parts of the book and students were allowed to answer without raising their hands. She drew a T-Chart on the board to model how she wanted them to take notes as they conducted research. She told students that they had two jobs and she gave very detailed instructions about what she expected. There was a loud yawn from a student as directions were being explained by the teacher. The participant monitored as the media specialist continued the lesson and students started to work independently.

Participant 4 submitted a very short lesson plan via e-mail. Her message stated:

Throughout the interview with Participant 4, she always shared her focus on general strategies and a belief that they should reach all learners. She seemed to conceptualize diversity as only the ESOL students that she taught and she felt that their needs were met by the ESOL teacher. The fact that she does acknowledge the cultural differences of her students and adapts the teaching methods to make the learning more relevant is evidence that her strategies somewhat align with culturally relevant pedagogy. She considered her use of pictures, drawings and flash cards to be an example of culturally relevant strategies.

Table 4.1. Participant Beliefs, Observed Practice, and Evidence of Student Engagemen

Participants	Stated Beliefs and Perceptions	Observed Instructional Practice	Evidence of Student Engagement and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
1	When students can connect to what is being taught, they are more interested and want to be more involved.	She walked around and monitored while students worked. She set the expectation for higher level sentences to be included in the writing piece and she looked for examples as she held short writing conferences.	Students were on-task. They raised their hands to ask questions. She made the learning relevant during Daily Oral Language by using sentences that connected to their real world. While teaching the grammar lesson, she made the sentences meaningful by connecting to “Country Western Day” which was a school event that took place on the day of the observation. She had very high expectations for all of her students. She praised students when they were correct and use positive and encouraging language to affirm their efforts.
2	When teachers are able to capture the students’ attention, it makes instruction stronger. When	Modeled how to use the Guess and Check problem solving strategy. Allowed students to answer	Reprimanded a student by calling her name in a non-threatening way. Students showed

	culturally relevant strategies are used, students do a better job or understanding the concept/topic and remembering.	questions without raising their hands. Students were seating in groups.	excitement when iPads were passed out for the second part of the math lesson.
3	Accountability leads to engagement. When students know that they're going to be responsible for what they are doing, they stay focused.	The teacher stretched their thinking questions that required them to explain/prove their answers. A number line was used as a visual aide to help struggling students.	Students were very focused on copying trivia during the second part of the lesson. Students were very helpful to each other.
4	Engagement transfers over to academic success. Engagement leads to an increase in student achievement. Strategies that help ESOL students will benefit all students.	The teacher gave students instructions and had students give her a thumbs-up once they had completed the task. The teacher modeled how she wanted the students to take notes.	Students worked independently on their Chromebooks to conduct research. Students who needed assistance raised their hands.

## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the relationship that exists between teacher perception of student engagement and culturally relevant pedagogy and the instructional strategies that are utilized. In the current study, teacher perception and the exploration of instructional strategies was only seen within the context of one elementary school and a group of teachers with three sources of evidence being used.

### **Summary of Findings and Conclusion**

The purpose of the present qualitative case study was to fill in knowledge gap created by the lack of information on elementary teacher perception of the instructional strategies that promote student engagement and the ways in which teacher perception informs practice. Strategies used by third, fourth and fifth grade teachers to promote student engagement were explored through the use of an interview protocol with open-ended questions that encouraged the sharing of information (Chapman, 2003). Open-ended questions were used to explore the perception of the participants about the impact of their instructional strategies on the attitudes and engagement levels of students and their beliefs about utilizing culturally relevant teaching strategies. In the current study, teacher perception of the impact of their instructional strategies and utilization of culturally relevant teaching methods was only seen within one elementary school context and a group of teachers with three sources of evidence being used.



Three research questions were used to guide the design and application of this single case research study. The first research question asked, “How do elementary teachers at Seventh Grove Elementary School define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Student Engagement?” To address this question, four elementary school teachers were interviewed. The teachers were asked to share what they knew about culturally relevant pedagogy and how they defined it. Teachers were also asked to define student engagement and give a specific example from their practice. Their definitions were then compared to each other and to the theoretical and scholarly notions of the terms. The teachers were asked questions to capture their beliefs about how the use of culturally relevant strategies impacts the engagement levels of their students.

The second research question asked, “What are the teachers’ assumptions and perception of the ways in which their instructional practice impact student engagement?” To address this question, interview responses and transcripts were analyzed to determine the beliefs about student engagement and the connections that were made between instructional practices and student engagement.

The third research question asked, “In what ways does teacher perception inform practice?” In order to address this question, a triangulated research design of interviews, direct observation, and the collection of lesson plans was employed. The researcher asked interview questions to determine the beliefs of the participants. Direct observations were conducted to determine if classroom practices reflected their stated beliefs. Lesson plans were reviewed to determine the type of planning used and if the type of planning aligns with observed classroom practices.

For the current study, a 12-question semi-structured interview protocol was designed to capture each individual's perspective on the topics. Direct classroom observations and teacher lesson plans were used to triangulate the data for this single case study. This chapter includes an analysis of the three sources of evidence utilized.

This study adds to the understanding of the ways in which schools can implement strategies to increase student engagement by examining the impact of teacher perception on the choices of instructional strategies. The information presented in this study provides insight into significant role of teacher perception and the implications of how the beliefs manifest in the classroom and inform educational practices.

**Research Question 1:** How do elementary teachers at Seventh Grove Elementary School define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Student Engagement?

None of the participants were familiar with the term culturally relevant pedagogy. They were able to infer the meaning of the term based on the fact that they believed it was a method of teaching that made a connection to the culture of students. All of the participants showed an awareness that the utilization of culturally relevant strategies required teachers to incorporate elements of culture into the instruction. Culturally relevant pedagogy was defined by the participants in a way that showed a very limited understanding of how the term is defined. Their definitions did not include an explanation of the role of the teacher or how this method of teaching impacts students. When teachers were asked to share strategies that they utilize to make learning more relevant, the examples provided were a few that are noted in the body of research on culturally relevant strategies. The participants felt that their use of read-alouds, video clips, songs and poems were examples of culturally relevant strategies. Participant 2 added her belief

that allowing students to share personal experiences is a strategy that she utilizes to make the learning more relevant. Three of the four participants cited the importance of using culture as a tool to enhance learning. Culture serves as the lens through which all learners view the curriculum and in turn the learning process. Teachers need to ensure that the teaching and learning experiences of their students allow their culture to remain intact and validated and still have a successful and valuable school experience (Manning & Baruth, 2009).

Much of what the participants described as central to their beliefs and practices was not fully consistent with the body of literature on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1994; Gay 2002). Participants did not show an awareness of the importance validating students' cultural heritage and identity by integrating their voice into everyday lessons or the importance of presenting multiple perspectives, both of which are noted in the research on culturally relevant pedagogy.

Student engagement was a term that the participants were much more familiar with. Each teacher was able to define student engagement based on their beliefs and expectations for students. The common themes that emerged as participants defined the term were that students were on-task, focused and engaged in the instruction. The teachers showed an awareness that student engagement may look different depending on the context. During a class discussion, the participants described that student engagement would consist of students raising their hands to ask and answer questions. During a research project, engagement might be evident by students working independently and going above and beyond to construct knowledge. In general, the way the term was defined and the strategies shared by the participants were very similar in nature.

**Research Question 2:** What are the teachers' assumptions and perceptions of the ways in which their instructional strategies impact student engagement?

There was a consensus among the participants that the use of hands-on activities increase student engagement. The participants shared a belief in the use of manipulatives in math and hands-on activities in science to engage students in the learning and maintain their interest. The participants believed that if students are interested in what is being taught then they will be more into the lesson which will also increase engagement and understanding.

When the participants were asked specifically about their beliefs about the utilization of culturally relevant teaching strategies to increase student engagement, similar strategies were mentioned but different perspectives were shared. Participant 1 and Participant 3 shared their belief that using language arts integration as an approach to make learning more meaningful. The use of readers theaters, picture books and songs were examples of culturally relevant strategies that teachers believed increased student engagement. Participant 3, a fifth grade teacher, shared that considers social studies an easy subject to use culturally relevant strategies because of the focus of the content focus on different ethnic groups. She explained that you can always be sure to cover every group with the different aspects of social studies. With looking at different language styles and we look at the origin of language and the origin of words. She shared a specific strategy that such as finding language and words from the different cultures that have been incorporated into the English language.

Participant 4 shared a strong belief that "generally the strategies for engagement are strategies that reach them all regardless of their background." She wanted to be very

clear that she did not “do anything to target specific students.” She believes that the use of manipulatives and technology increases student engagement for all students and should be fit in with the instruction as much as possible.

It is important to examine how beliefs are framed based on knowledge and experiences. The goal of public education is to ensure that all students receive a quality education. The manner in which the need of each individual student is met determines the outcome of that goal. The participants all stated their beliefs about the role of the student and teachers. All participants shared a belief that both the teachers and students have a responsibility.

**Research Question 3:** In what ways does teacher perception inform practice?

Teacher perception about the value and importance of specific teaching strategies has a profound impact on their instructional choices. To gain insight into their perception about culturally relevant pedagogy, participants were asked to share their beliefs about the benefits of culturally relevant strategies. Three of the participants felt that culturally relevant strategies keep students engaged and lead to stronger classroom instruction. Participant 4 seemed to see the benefit of culturally relevant strategies when used with ESOL students but she continued to reiterate her belief during the interview that effective strategies are good for all students. During the interviews, participants shared the benefits of using technology as it relates to increased student engagement. When observations were conducted, two of the four participants had their students using technology. Students in Participant One’s class were using Nearpod on their Chromebooks and students in Participant Four’s class were conducting online research. The observation confirmed what was shared during the interview.

There is a consensus among some researchers about the characteristics of culturally relevant teachers (Banks, 2002). According to Ladson-Billings (1994, 2000), culturally relevant teachers understand that diverse and minority students learn and master instructional material when there is a match between their present achievement levels and the tasks to be completed. In culturally relevant teaching there is much differentiation and variety and the pace is brisk. The response to interview questions and planning that was shown by the participants of the current study would not fit the mold of how culturally relevant teachers are defined in the literature. There are elements that are evident in the planning, beliefs and instructional strategies of the participants that show a basic understanding of the theory.

Culturally relevant classrooms are pleasant, friendly, and open. They are not hostile or repressive. The atmosphere is amicable, enthusiastic, and responsive, without sacrificing orderliness. Effective teachers of culturally diverse students have high expectations; optimize academic learning time; organize, manage, and plan well; and maintain a pleasant and respectful classroom atmosphere. (Brophy, 1998, Hawley, 1990, Cruickshank, 1995). The learning environment in Participant One's classroom was one of high expectations. All of the participants had respectful classroom environments.

Teachers who support culturally relevant teaching believe that all students can achieve and succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It was obvious from interviewing the participants that they believe in their students' ability to attain high levels of academic achievement. The language used in their classrooms and their disposition is best characterized as treating students as they were competent. It is noted that treating students as if they were competent would ultimately lead to high levels of competency. The

teachers encouraged students and praised them when questions were answered correctly and when they put forth their best effort to attempt to answer a questions. The teachers made consistent attempts to build their students' confidence.

Recognizing teachers' beliefs and understanding how these beliefs are enacted in the classroom is crucial (Bryan, 2003). What teachers know and believe impact their instructional decisions. The researcher compared beliefs stated in the interview to the instructional practice observed in the classroom to determine if the beliefs informed practice. The researcher did not observe the strategies mentioned in the interview but there are several factors that may have contributed to this lack of evidence. The teachers were not following a normal schedule on the day of the observation because of a school-wide event, the observation only lasted for one block of thirty minutes and the observations took place the day before Valentine's Day. The lesson that I observed may not have been typical of a lesson on a normal day of instruction.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The intent of the current study was to gain insight into the beliefs of elementary school teachers as it relates to culturally relevant pedagogy and student engagement and investigate how the beliefs align with classroom practices. This study was designed to be exploratory in nature. The strength of the study included the investigation of three data sources, interviews, observations, and lesson planning in one context to gain that greater understanding. The focus of four teachers at one research site precludes the results from being generalized to a larger setting but the results provide valuable insight. The body of literature on teacher perception is very limited. The current study provides a valuable contribution to the body of literature, especially because of the context. The setting of the

current study took place in an elementary school where all of the teachers are White and 80% of the students are Black, Asian or Hispanic. A case study including participants from more grade levels in elementary school could broaden the applicability of research.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The information collected for this study research has implications for the practitioner.

1. Culturally relevant pedagogy needs to be reviewed by administrators and district level leaders to determine a plan for professional development implementation. Teachers need to be provided opportunities to become familiar with the theory and receive guidance on implementation.
2. Teachers need to make a conscious effort to identify strategies that make learning relevant and engage students. This can be achieved through reflect on the levels of engagement observed during instruction to determine effective strategies.
3. Practitioners need collaborate and share strategies and lessons that make learning relevant and engage students.

### **Implications**

Given the results of this study, school and district level leaders should consider offering training sessions on culturally relevant pedagogy. The implementation of a professional development series to assist teachers in understanding the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy and support teachers in utilizing culturally relevant strategies would empower the masses. If teachers are equipped with the knowledge and understanding of how to use effective instructional strategies, they are more likely to refine their practice. It is more likely that teachers will implement a practice if it is encouraged and recommended by school and district level leaders.



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## APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ivey Addison, from the Ed.D in Curriculum Studies Program at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC. The results of this research study will be contributed to a dissertation study. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an elementary school teacher.

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The topic I want to explore will be teachers' perceptions of the impact of their instructional strategies on student engagement. I am interested in exploring how elementary teachers articulate their thoughts and beliefs about the ways in which utilizing culturally relevant methods and strategies impact the level of engagement of culturally diverse students.

### PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in the following things:

I would like to interview you on two separate occasions, each for forty-five minutes. **No individual student, teacher, or school will be the focus of this research project. Pseudonyms will be used.**

I would like to audiotape the interview. I will take handwritten notes in addition and only notes if preferred by the participant.

I would like to conduct one classroom observation. The observation will last thirty minutes.

### POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Your interviews will be tape-recorded. **I will protect the identities of participants** through the use of pseudonyms in this and any future publications or presentations. You should understand that you might be quoted directly, but that **your name will not be used in any part of the report. All data will be stored in a secure location.** Please understand that you may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

While you may not directly benefit from your participation, your participation will contribute to the body of knowledge on culturally relevant pedagogy and student engagement. Your insight could contribute to initiatives and professional development recommendations for teachers and administrators. Lastly, this study could contribute to all teachers being able to reflect upon their classroom practices and interactions to influence their ability to create meaningful learning experiences for all of their students.

## PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

If you are chosen to participate in the research study, you will be given \$40.00 for your participation.

In case you decide to withdraw or are withdrawn by the investigator after the commencement of the research study, the incentives of \$20.00 will be given to the participant.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

With your permission, your interview will be audiotaped-recorded. **I will protect your identity through** the use of pseudonyms in this and any future publications or presentations. You should understand that they might be quoted directly, but that our name will not be used in any part of the report. All data will be stored in a secured location. You will be allowed to edit your transcripts. Please understand that you may withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice.

I, Ivey Addison, and my dissertation chair, Dr. Tamba Jackson, will be the only people who have access to the consent forms, audiotapes, transcripts and handwritten notes. The consent forms, audiotapes, transcripts and handwritten notes will be used for research purposes only.

The consent forms, transcripts and handwritten notes will be stored for three years from the date the study is completed. After the three years, all of the research materials will be destroyed by myself and/or Dr. Jackson.

I will erase the audiotapes after they are transcribed.

## PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. Participation or nonparticipation will not affect your treatment, evaluation, employment status, or any other personal consideration or right you usually expect. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which in the opinion of the research warrant doing so.

#### IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, feel free to contact me or contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Tambra Jackson.

#### RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the office of Research Compliance, 901 Sumter Street, Byrnes 515, Columbia, South Columbia, 29208.

#### SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT

I understand the procedures and conditions of my participation described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

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Name of Subject

---

Signature of Subject

---

Date

## **APPENDIX B : INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- 1) How did you become a teacher? Probe: Were there particular people or experiences that influenced your choice?
- 2) Why did you want to become a teacher?
- 3) How many years have you been teaching?
- 4) What grades have you taught? What kinds of schools have you taught in?
- 5) How do you define student engagement? Probe: please give an example from your practice.
- 6) What do you think is the impact of your choice of instructional strategies on the engagement levels of your students? Probe: are students solely responsible for being engaged? When a student is off task, do you question the student's behavior or your planning first? Explain.  
  
Do most students in your class have positive attitudes about learning? Explain.  
What would be an example? How would you explain any negative attitudes students may have about learning?
- 7) Are there specific strategies you use that increase student engagement?  
  
What do you know about culturally relevant teaching? How do you define culturally relevant teaching?
- 8) What strategies do you utilize to make learning more relevant and effective for your ethnically diverse students? How often do you use these strategies?

Do you think there are any challenges to implementing culturally relevant teaching?

9) What obvious student impact have you noticed when using these strategies?

10) Have you observed a positive impact on all students?

11) What are your beliefs about these strategies?

12) Do the strategies change from year to year?

## APPENDIX C: LESSON PLANS

### Participant 1

Language Skills: Complete language assignment reviewing subject and object pronouns, base words, and conventions.

### Independent Reading and Conferencing

Writing: *I can support my opinion with reasons and facts.*

Review and recap what we know about persuasive writing; review how OREO can help remind us what needs to be included in our writing; look at current writing topic: What is the best grade in elementary school? We have reworked our opening statements, made sure we had at least three reasons, and given explanations for our reasons that also include at least one fact.

The other thing that needs focus today is sentence structure. Go back through your writing and check to see that you have included higher level sentences where appropriate- can you combine two similar sentences into a compound sentence? Can you turn a sentence around to form an introductory phrase? Do you have sentences that can be combined to use compound subjects or predicates? This is your writing focus for today. Then, focus on your closing. According to OREO, you will restate your opinion. Try to restate your opening statement in a different way that closes your writing. (Students have been working on this assignment this week focusing on a different component of persuasive/opinion writing each day.)

Researching: *I can share information about contributions to life in the United States by African Americans.*

Continue to read and research to find out more information about your assigned African American. Check your requirements list to make sure you include all the information necessary for a complete project. Begin organizing your information so that it flows smoothly, TRANSITIONS, from one part to another. Don't forget to cite the sources where you find information that you use. This will be the last day to gather information in class. Monday you will work to put your project together. I am looking for quality and thorough work. (Students have been working on this project all of this week; they are working in pairs)

### **Participant 2**

Standard 3.G.1 Understand that shapes in different categories may share attributed and that the shared attributes can define a larger category (ex. Quadrilaterals)

1. Daily Problem Solving- review of guess and check problem solving strategy
2. Objective: Students will review the attributes of polygons and classify shapes.

We will be using a nearpod presentation on ipads to review

3. "Family Feud" style review game (if there is time)
4. Chapter 14 Test

### **Participant 3**

1. Students will take their morning work assessment on Edmodo. When they finish, they will go to Compass Learning until all have finished.
2. Check Homework from the night before



3. Review fraction problems regarding equivalent fractions, simplifying fractions, and comparing fractions
4. Take quiz (if time) before Country/Western Day, if not, have students finish afterwards.

#### **Participant 4**

1. Go over accessing ebook resources for our PBL and
2. Discuss how to read ebooks.
3. Discuss how to take notes/generate possible topics for further inquiry.