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Exploring Culturally Relevant Teaching: Lessons from a Middle School Classroom

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Exploring Culturally Relevant Teaching: Lessons from a Middle School Classroom

by

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Dedication

for

Will and Emma Kate
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my husband, Will, who was beyond supportive as I completed this degree. I have been working on this degree for most of our marriage, and he has been a steadfast support throughout the entire process. Also, my daughter, Emma Kate, was the best addition to our family; I was determined to finish so I could show her what she could also accomplish one day if she chooses.

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my study in our school and provided words of encouragement as I worked through each phase. Kai Brailey was my sounding board as I planned instruction and made curricular decisions. Without her reflective input, I would not have accomplished so much with my study participants. Natalie Osborne Smith helped create the single-gendered class and provided regular support of my efforts to try something different in our school. Kyle Meetze provided helpful input and strategies that supported my work with male students in a single-gender classroom. Without these school leaders, I would not have been able to conduct a study in my most realistic and comfortable setting, my school classroom.
Abstract

In the public school setting and beyond, African American males are often positioned as a problem. Educators have implemented and studied the use of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in an effort to shift this deficit perspective of African American male students, as well as other students of color. CRP positions all students as knowledgeable and capable of learning while valuing their cultural backgrounds and experiences. CRP also provides an opportunity to explore issues around race and culture. Though some research has been done in the area of CRP, very little focuses on the students’ experiences in culturally relevant classrooms, and there are no studies that focus specifically on the middle school student’s experience. I conducted this action research study to fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, I sought to understand: What happens when the interests, lives, and cultural resources of middle school students are drawn upon and studied through English Language Arts curriculum?

There were 11 male students in my seventh-grade, single-gender English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. I collected data on my instructional moves and about the responses of all the students while focusing on two African American boys who had also been in my classroom the prior year. Data included notes from my researcher’s notebook, video-recorded classroom observations, audio-recorded interviews, and students’ learning artifacts.

As the instructor, I followed three major principles of CRP: I drew on students’ lives and interests, relied on classroom community, and brought race and cultural
background into the curriculum. I paid close attention to how students responded to my instructional decisions and often adjusted my teaching in an effort to increase student engagement. I identified three other characteristics of my attempt to become a culturally relevant teacher: 1) I made an effort to develop caring relationships with students; 2) I believed that all students were knowledgeable and able to learn; and 3) I reflected on my racial identity. This resulted in an ever-changing lived curriculum because my reflection on student responses often led to instructional changes. I identified four pathways to student engagement: students engaged when they 1) had prior knowledge of the topic; 2) could make a personal connection; 3) were involved in play as a means of learning; and 4) had an authentic purpose. My study suggests that teachers interested in CRP need to: 1) recognize that CRP is based on best practice teaching strategies; 2) create a space for curricular connections to race and culture; and 3) reflect on their own racial identities. More research is needed on middle grades students’ responses to CRP and on European American teachers who are implementing CRP.

Keywords: culturally relevant teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, middle grades
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois asked, “How does it feel to be a problem?” referring to the social, economic, and political struggle African Americans faced. This question is still applicable today, although now it often focuses on young and adult African American males. During the years I spent working on my dissertation, there were numerous racial injustices enacted against African American males which received national media attention. When I was writing my proposal in 2012, Trayvon Martin, a young unarmed African American man in Florida was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer. Over the 2013 summer break, Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Martin. I clearly remember the day that the Trayvon Martin case came up in class with my seventh grade students in the fall semester of 2013. Like many others across the country, they strongly disagreed with the verdict. During the year following my data collection, a 12-year-old African American boy, Tamir Rice, was shot and killed by a police officer in Cleveland, OH. The boy was in a park near his home with an airsoft gun and was shot within seconds after police arrived. Two weeks prior to finishing my dissertation, an unarmed African American man, Walter Scott, was shot and killed by a police officer in South Carolina after being pulled over for a broken tail light on his car.

These are just three of the many stories of unarmed African American males who have been killed. These events have sparked protests and brought conversations about race to the forefront in the news and in social media. Though there are loud voices
protesting the unjust deaths of African American boys and men, there are also many who are not protesting. Instead, far too often, African American males continue to be positioned as *problematic.*

Many educators, wanting to counter this narrative for their students and, ultimately, in society, have argued for culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP)—for a pedagogy which draws on students’ out-of-school literacies, experiences, and knowledge in developing curriculum and gives them an opportunity to engage in authentic learning. However, while numerous researchers and practitioners (Brown, 2007; Crocco, 1998; Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Harmon, 2012; Howard, 2003; Jackson, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Schmeichel, 2011; Sleeter, 2012) have written about the use of culturally relevant teaching, many of these authors only define CRP or advocate for this type of teaching. The studies which have been conducted (Bondy, Ross, Hambacher, & Acosta, 2012; Dillon, 1989; Hefflin, 2002; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings; Lopez, 2011; Lynn, Johnson, & Hassan, 1999; Powell, Cantrell, & Rightmyer, 2013; Tate, 1995) focus on the teachers’ practices or experiences in implementing this teaching approach. In only a few instances have researchers (Kirkland, 2011; Phillippo, 2012; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; Wiggan, 2008) focused on students’ responses to culturally relevant pedagogy, and I found no studies about the responses of middle school students.

I conducted this study to fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, I sought to understand: *What happens when the interests, lives, and cultural resources of middle school students are drawn upon and studied through ELA curriculum?* To focus on the
impact of CRP on African American male students, I collected additional data on two African American boys in my single-gender classroom of 11 male students.

**My Prior Understanding of Race and Culture**

As a young child, my parents taught me that I was to treat all people the same, no matter the color of their skin. I accepted this as the right thing to do and did not question this lesson until I was enrolled in doctoral classes where I learned about the impact of culture on language (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Meier, 1998; Milner, 2010; Nieto, 1999; Rickford, 1998; Tatum, 2005). I had grown up in a small town in the southeastern part of the country where there was a very clear divide between the European American majority and the African American minority. Not only were there parts of town that were known to belong to one group or the other, but there were plenty of judgments that each group made about the other. I know that like many other places during that time, and unfortunately still today, this was/is quite common. I am also aware that in other parts of the country and the world, the same issues exist; it is only the composition of the disenfranchised group that varies. In the southeastern United States, the largest disenfranchised group are African Americans.

When I was young, my grandmother worked at one of the local banks, and on some summer days my grandfather, who was retired and often my babysitter, would walk with me to visit her at work. One day, when I was eight years old, stands out in my memory. As we walked down Irby Street, which was a cut through road we used to avoid Main Street, a young African American boy was playing outside of a small row of
brick apartments. As we passed, he shouted something at us. I do not remember exactly what he said. My grandfather did not respond, and we just kept walking.

Once we were at the bank, my grandmother asked about how our walk over had been, and my grandfather responded that it was fine except that a little “nigger” boy had yelled at us. Hearing him use this word made me perk up and listen closely. Not only had my parents taught me that I was to treat everyone the same, they also taught me to never use that word. Even at that young age, I was keenly aware of the hateful nature of the word. I did not say anything to my grandfather because I was also taught to respect my grandparents which meant not questioning what they said. I remember the confusion I felt—the mixed emotion of being so enamored by my grandfather while knowing that he had said something that was so wrong. This was not an isolated experience. My parents remind me that I would often whisper into their ears that one of my grandparents had said something they had told me was wrong, and I was often confused by the language they used.

I am grateful that my parents taught me to be colorblind and that certain language was wrong. It provided me with a foundation that led me to the place I am today. They provided my initial understandings about race and culture. What they taught me was engrained in me and was the lens through which, as a child and as an adult, I viewed others, including, when I became a teacher, the students in my classroom. For many years, I tried to view every student equally, essentially ignoring their individual characteristics. In some ways, this was a strength because I did not let students’ cultural backgrounds become an obstacle, but I subsequently learned in my doctoral classes that by ignoring the diversity of my students, I was also missing numerous resources my
students offered that I could use in lessons and curriculum planning to further their thinking and learning and to further grow in my teaching.

This was a huge shift for me as both a teacher and a person. Once I came to this realization, my biggest fear was, and often still is, the fear of saying something wrong about culture in general and race in particular. I understand that unlike some of my students, I am part of the dominant culture because I am a European American. Because I was and am sensitive to this difference, I feel hesitant to speak openly about race with my students; I am afraid of being misunderstood. Like many of my African American students, I have not experienced being part of a school or classroom setting where racial diversity is viewed as a valuable resource or openly discussed. To the contrary, for most of my teaching experience and for most of my students and their families, cultural background was and is either overlooked or used as an identifying label to explain failure on standardized tests or some other measure of school performance. I faced my fear by conducting a study to learn more about being a culturally sensitive teacher, one who was not colorblind.

Though I saw the good intentions in the lessons my parents taught me, I now know that my students are not all the same and that because all of us are different, all of us offer things that students can use to learn and I can use to teach. I wanted to learn how to acknowledge diversity as a valuable tool and recognize and rely on the varying cultural resources my students bring to the classroom. I wanted to become a teacher who acknowledges the rich cultural, social, and linguistic resources of my students, and draw on them as I develop lessons and curriculum that support them as learners and as people.
My decision to conduct this study was tied not only to the history of discrimination in the U.S., the recent attention to the long-standing pattern of taking the lives of unarmed African-American males and my childhood, but by experiences working for six years as a literacy coach in two middle schools. In both school settings, I had numerous conversations with teachers about students’ performance, particularly about the performance of African American students. As a literacy coach, I facilitated various professional learning opportunities for teachers through study groups, professional book studies, workshops, and graduate courses, many of which focused on the role of culture and its impact in literacy education. In these various professional learning settings, we read from texts such as *The Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and *Funds of Knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Teachers’ understanding about how cultural background impacts students fell along a continuum. Some teachers who initially considered students’ cultural backgrounds as a deficit shifted their thinking and began focusing on students’ strengths and on critical parts of students’ backgrounds. However, some teachers did not make this shift. I was intrigued and initially wanted to study their response, but I quickly remembered that, in previous research projects, I learned very little from such inquiries. At the same time, I realized that if I worked with teachers who were shifting their thinking and trying new teaching practices, I would hear many of the things I already knew to be true about students, instruction, and assessment. I concluded that in order to most authentically understand the school experience of students in underrepresented groups and their experience in the school setting, I needed to work with and learn from students, the very people most impacted by instructional decisions that I and their other teachers make.
I consequently decided to move away from literacy coaching to return to the classroom the year prior to conducting my study in an effort to understand first-hand how I could put into practice my belief in the value of the knowledge that all students bring to their school experiences. This study, then, became a very personal endeavor.

**Theoretical Framework**

My work as a literacy educator is grounded in sociocultural theory (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986) and critical theory (Dewey, 1938; Dewey, 1995; Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994). Students bring cultural knowledge with them to school which can serve as a foundation for developing curriculum and instruction (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Heath). Viewing students’ cultural diversity as an asset is essential for equitable teaching practice. It is important to me as an educator that all of my students see me as a teacher who celebrates and depends on the cultural knowledge they each bring from their homes, families, and communities. In addition to the view that cultural knowledge is valuable and an asset to literacy curriculum, my work is also grounded in a critical belief that the traditional school setting is structured to target the needs of white, middle class students. In my school, African Americans only make up 10% of the population; European-Americans make up 77%. In addition, only 22% of all the students are enrolled in the subsidized lunch program. Instruction is targeted to the majority of students, a group comprised of middle class European Americans, not necessarily because the teachers are purposely choosing to ignore the other 23%, but because those students are a minority.
**The role of sociocultural theory.** My goal in this study was to use students’ cultural backgrounds as a guide for developing curriculum and delivering instruction. I wanted all of my students to see themselves in the texts they encountered and the literary touchstones they found. As I worked to understand the experiences of the students in my classroom, my thinking was guided by my belief that my students held a great deal of knowledge that was different from my cultural experience and that I could improve their learning experiences by drawing on their interests, lives, and cultural resources as I planned lessons and curriculum.

My thinking was guided by what are considered seminal texts in sociocultural theory (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Heath, 1983; Rosenblatt, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986). Based on the work of these theorists and researchers, my foundational beliefs about language and literacy learning were that 1) students’ language is uniquely tied to their cultural identity and that 2) students’ cultural knowledge must be an integral part of curriculum and instruction in order to most effectively support student learning. As Villegas and Lucas (2007) argued:

> learners use their prior knowledge and beliefs to make sense of the new ideas and experiences they encounter in school. A central role of the culturally and linguistically responsive teacher is to support students’ learning by helping them build bridges between what they already know about a topic and what they need to learn about it. (p. 29)

As Villegas and Lucas pointed out, if the teacher does not find a way to access what students already know, the students’ opportunities are stifled because their teacher will not know about and thus not be able to help students use their prior knowledge and
experiences as a foundation for new learning. 

**Students’ language is tied to cultural identity.** Reporting on studies of Black Communication, Meier (1998) provided a helpful conceptualization of culture as significantly tied to language by explaining that language is so much a part of who we are that it is one of many taken-for-granted elements of our identity:

For most of us, culture is, at least in part, what we have grown up taking for granted about the world, what we assume to be true, and what we do without ever stopping to think very much about it. (p. 21)

Meier’s definition of cultural practice supports the idea that language is absorbed and enacted in the ways people communicate within a certain community or culture. Through language, people begin to form their identities. The language through which people perceive the world and others significantly impacts who they are and how they view themselves. González (2001) explained that language is symbolic of a person’s identity, and that through language “selfhoods are constructed, identities forged, and social processes enacted” (p. 173). Baldwin (1979), in a letter to the editor of *New York Times*, agreed that language “reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger public, or communal identity” (para. 4). Similar observations can be made about how African American students’ use of African American Language (AAL) in school is a means of identification as a member of their culture. Rickford (1998), in an interview for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, explained that no matter how much effort is put toward erasing African American vernacular from students’ language, the language will persist “because it feeds into a whole alternative set of identities and purposes that speakers find rewarding and valuable” (p. 65). Rickford’s argument further supports the
idea that students’ use of home language is connected to their identity and membership in their cultural group. These scholars share a view of language as intimately tied to the speaker’s identity in their cultures. These studies worked to form my early understanding that language and culture are intricately woven.

**Cultural knowledge must be a part of curriculum and instruction.** My work with students involved in the study was informed by researchers and writers (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Delpit, 2012; Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010; Gonzalez, 2001; Tatum, 2009; Zentella, 2005) who have shown that underrepresented groups of students have immense cultural knowledge which contributes to their literacy learning. González posited that, rather than overlooking what students’ daily experiences have to offer, educators must look for “educative processes that draw on the funds of knowledge that both households and schools possess” (p. xxi). Similarly, Delpit argued that educators should “recognize that the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity;” devaluing that diversity is equivalent to implying “that something is wrong with the student and his or her family” (p. 19). Zentella argued that teachers could benefit from becoming more aware of home practices and learning how to use them to create instructional programs founded on the contributions made by all the learners involved. I approached my study with the intention of drawing on the participants’ interests, lives, and cultural resources as I developed curriculum and instructional plans.

**The role of critical theory.** One purpose of my study was to question the traditional model of school that heavily targets European American, middle class students (Au & Raphael, 2000; Boykin, 1984; Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010; Harper &
Davis, 2012; James, 2012; Jenkins, 2006; Milner, 2010; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Tatum, 2005; Tatum, 2009). I recognized that there were subtle markers of discrimination in the schools where I taught, though my colleagues often seemed to be unaware of and likely never intended these instances. I only began to notice inconsistencies in instruction as I became more aware of them in my doctoral classes.

Taking a critical lens opened my eyes to an unfortunate reality that many underrepresented students face daily—a reality in which they rarely see themselves in the texts and lessons, in which their culture is overlooked completely, and in which they are constantly compared to the European American, middle class, heterosexual majority. For students of color, this comparison is often made in terms of standardized test performance, discipline data, attendance, and graduation rate.

I used a critical perspective—one guided specifically by researchers focused on the role of race and inequality in schools (Delpit, 2012; Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2008)—to question how my teaching practices impacted my students’ school experiences. In order to improve the opportunities I provided them in my classroom, I drew on critical theory as a framework for considering the issues my students encountered in their school experiences. I tried to work against what I came to understand as a traditional model of schooling, and I specifically focused on two of my African American students’ interests and out-of-school literacies as I considered how I could use their literacies to create meaningful learning opportunities for them (Irvine, 2003; Perry, 1998; Tatum, 2009).

The critical perspective brings attention to this de-valuing of home and community in the school setting by asking questions about who is determining what is
and is not valued. A common trend in schools follows the model that Freire (1993) referred to as the banking model of education, “in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (p. 72). Following the banking model, students do not make meaning on their own because they come to expect the teacher to do the thinking for them. Lindfors (1999) similarly warned that often the teacher is perceived as the participant who holds the knowledge. Johnston (2004) agreed that the language teachers use in guiding students “creates realities and invites identities” and also “works to position [students] in relation to one another” (p. 9). Dewey (1938) offered an alternative, explaining that when students are fully engaged in the learning process, the learning “is a co-operative enterprise,” (p. 72) in which the teacher is serving as a sort of guide or facilitator to the learning and the students have an equal voice in the content and processes that are explored. When students have more of a voice in the classroom and teachers serve as the guide, student engagement is more likely because of the focus on the students’ specific interests. This issue of questioning what is valued and under-valued in school is essential because not only are students learning reading and writing skills in literacy classrooms, but they are also learning about the world and their place in it. As Freebody, Luke, and Gilbert (1991) wrote, “What students learn in reading and literature lessons can be described as a schema for what counts as mature adult literacy, as a model for what counts as valid, appropriate, and institutionally sanctioned ways of reading-for-school” (p. 436). Therefore, in my study I tried to think beyond the traditional model of schooling to incorporate my students’ interests and out-of-school literacies to help create a more engaging learning experience.
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Sociocultural theory and critical theory formed the lens through which I considered the student participants’ middle school experiences. The work I did in this study was grounded in my belief that students in literacy classrooms should have the opportunity to be part of a learning environment that values cultural diversity and seeks to use the cultural knowledge students bring to the classroom to inform curriculum and learning engagements. This belief led me to want to learn about the experiences of underrepresented middle school students because I was hopeful that being in an ELA class that depended on the students’ cultural knowledge could have a positive impact on their learning. Informing this aspect of my theoretical frame, I drew from Luke and Freebody (1997) who explained that:

The shift here, then, is from viewing that which students bring to schools and classrooms in terms of individual differences, knowledges, skills, and backgrounds to a view that students bring to classrooms available cultural, community and social resources, texts and discourses. (p. 208)

Similarly, I was guided by Nieto (1999) who suggested that “learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur among learners and teachers” (p. 2). With Nieto’s suggestion in mind, I conducted this study based on the hope that as a teacher who immersed myself in professional learning founded in sociocultural and critical perspectives and who feels a sense of urgency to implement culturally relevant practices in my classroom, I might provide a more supportive learning environment for my students. After reading numerous texts from researchers (Brown & Brown, 2012;
Brown-Jeffy and Cooper, 2011; Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Hale-Benson, 1990; Harmon, 2012; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Tatum, 2009) who define and encouraged the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, I identified the following components as foundational in culturally relevant teaching:

- The teacher is caring and invested in developing relationships with students.
- The teacher believes that all students can learn and achieve academically.
- The teacher selects culturally relevant texts and engagements that draw on students’ out-of-school literacies and allow for students’ interests to drive the curriculum.
- The teacher creates a classroom environment that is safe and relies on collaborative efforts of all students.
- The teacher guides students in critically considering community issues and seeking action to improve those issues.

A literature review by Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) improved my understanding of the history and evolution of this approach to teaching. They discussed the change in terminology including “(a) culturally appropriate (Au & Jordan, 1981); (b) culturally congruent (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981); (c) mitigating cultural discontinuity (Macias, 1987); (d) culturally responsive (Cazden & Legget, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982); and (e) culturally compatible (Jordan, 1985; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987)” (p. 67). These terms were all used to refer to the now more widely understood notion that the relationship between students’ culture and school is influential in students’ academic achievement. The term CRP emerged from Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study of eight elementary teachers. Her book, *The Dreamkeepers* (2009) has become a seminal text and
is the work that is responsible for introducing the term in the field of education. This term, *culturally relevant pedagogy*, seems to have prevailed over time, though Gay’s (2010) culturally responsive pedagogy has also become common in the field in more recent years. Gay made a similar point about the various names used for this approach to teaching, which included “culturally relevant, sensitive, centered, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, synchronized, and responsive,” explaining that they all refer to “ideas about why it is important to make classroom instruction more consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students” (p. 31).

Brown and Brown (2012) argued that culturally relevant teachers recognize that “U.S. society and its schools operate in culturally normative ways that alternately deny or marginalize alternative perspectives” (p. 19) and work to upset that norm through their teaching practices. Gay (2010) defined this approach to teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Specifically, this approach “teaches to and through the strengths of these students” (Gay, p. 31). Delpit (2012) added that “if the curriculum we use to teach our children does not connect in positive ways to the culture young people bring to school, it is doomed to failure” (p. 20). In addition, Hale-Benson (1990) explained there would be no educational improvements for African American children until educators “conceptualize Black children within the context of their culture” (p. 211).

There are multiple frameworks for conceptualizing and enacting culturally relevant teaching from various researchers. Ladson-Billings (1995) explained that CRP is founded on three tenets: “(a) students must experience academic success; (b) students
must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 160). Tatum (2009) outlined three key teaching strategies for supporting African American students’ learning—teachers should demonstrate caring, think carefully about their responses to African American students whose behaviors might initially seem incongruent, and view literacy development as more than the students’ reading and writing growth. Similarly, Harmon (2012) also provided an explanation of culturally relevant teaching specific to African American students, arguing that teachers should “(a) draw on African and African American culture and history, (b) locate ‘self’ in a historical and cultural context, (c) enable students to create new knowledge based upon life experiences, and (d) view knowledge as reciprocal” (p. 13). Rychly and Graves (2012) added that teachers whose practices are culturally relevant are caring and have empathetic responses to students and are naturally reflective about their practices, their attitudes, and their beliefs about students.

Howard (2003) argued that there is a need for teacher reflection as a part of culturally relevant teaching practices. Delpit (2012) provided a set of questions that would support a teacher’s reflection:

- Are we connecting in positive ways to the culture that our African American young people bring to school?
- Are we ensuring that our students know that people who look like them, both in the past and present, have produced and are producing phenomenal intellectual accomplishments?
- Are we making connections between young people’s lives and the content that we attempt to teach?

- Do they feel welcomed into the school environment, or do they feel that they must change who they are to be accepted? (pp. 155-157)

**Conclusion**

In this study, I sought to understand the experiences of students in my ELA class as I implemented culturally relevant teaching practices. I collected data on whole class responses while also focusing on two African American students. My theoretical perspective as I approached this study was based on sociocultural theory and critical theory. I relied on sociocultural theory because I believe that students’ cultural backgrounds offer rich resources to be used in planning lessons and developing curriculum. Critical theory provided me with a lens through which I viewed the school setting as being founded on traditional norms based on the dominant middle class, heterosexual, European American culture. I drew on critical theory to bring into question these often unspoken norms that are used to measure and define success for students. As an educator, these theoretical foundations led me to learn about and implement culturally relevant teaching practices in an effort to more successfully teach the students in my classroom.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

I reviewed the literature in the area of culturally relevant pedagogy. Many well-known researchers and practitioners (Delpit 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tatum, 2009) wrote about culturally relevant pedagogy, defining it or encouraging its use. Their texts helped shape my understanding of what CRP is and how it could help me better serve the students in my ELA classroom. In reviewing the research on culturally relevant pedagogy, I focused on studies which involved African American students in K-12 classrooms. I chose to focus on African American students because they are the largest underrepresented group in my geographical area. I grouped those studies into two categories: studies which focused on teachers’ implementation of CRP and those that explored students’ responses to their teachers’ use of culturally relevant pedagogy. I then attempted to sort the studies within each category based on the grade level of students: elementary, middle, or high. There were studies about teachers in all three grade-level bands, but I could not sort studies focused on students’ experiences by grade level because the studies only focused on high school students.

Studies Focused on Teachers’ Practices

**Elementary school teachers.** Howard’s (2001) case study focused on elementary school teachers’ “culturally sensitive” (p. 183) practices in their work with African American students. Howard asked stakeholders to nominate teachers “who were judged effective teachers of African American students” (p. 183). Originally, “twenty-one nominators (6 elementary school principals, 4 parents, 5 teachers, 3 school district
administrators, and 3 civic leaders) were asked to nominate teachers “whose pedagogical practices contributed to the academic and social development of African American students” (pp. 183-184). Howard did not provide any further criteria to define what he considered to be effective, but instead, he let the nominators use their own understandings of effective teachers to guide their nominations. Howard explained that the nominators “were merely asked to provide the names of teachers they believe were making a difference in the academic performance of African American students” (p. 184). The group identified 12 individuals who they felt were effective teachers of African American students. Howard’s next step was to create a framework based on various researchers’ (Boykin, 1994; Foster, 1997; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1995) work which included 20 teaching practices broken into three categories: “Communication Styles,” “Culture & Learning,” and “Perceptions of Knowledge” (p. 185). Within these categories (see Table 2.1), were a variety of teaching practices.

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<th>Table 2.1</th>
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<td><strong>Howard’s Framework of Teaching Practices</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Communication Styles</strong></td>
<td><strong>Culture &amp; Learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Perceptions of Knowledge</strong></td>
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<td>Expressive Individualism</td>
<td>Community Solidarity</td>
<td>Subjective View of Knowledge</td>
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<td>Straightforward/Direct</td>
<td>Warm Demanders</td>
<td>Critical View of Knowledge</td>
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<td>Signifying</td>
<td>Affirmation of Students’ Cultural Identity</td>
<td>Emphasis on Skill Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of Black English</td>
<td>High Expectations for Students</td>
<td>Use of Students’ Cultural Knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vernacular</td>
<td>Emphasis on Collaboration and Collective Good</td>
<td>Universal Literacy</td>
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<td>Oral Expression</td>
<td>Learning as Social Process</td>
<td>Creating New Knowledge (p. 185)</td>
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<td>Spontaneity</td>
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To narrow the list of 12 teachers to a smaller group of participants, Howard observed all 12 nominees using the framework of teaching practices as a guide. After his observations, he narrowed the original list of 12 teachers to four who used at least 15 of the teaching practices from his framework. These four teachers, Hazel, Dorothy, Marilyn, and Louise, participated in the study. All four participants were African American teachers whose experience ranged from five to twenty years in the classroom. They taught in “African American school settings in lower-class to middle-class areas of a city located in the northwestern region of the United States” (p. 184). To collect data, Howard used “in-depth, structured interviews” (p. 185) which he conducted three times with each teacher. In addition, he collected data from observations of the teachers in their classrooms over a period of four months and from numerous informal conversations with the teachers.

Howard analyzed his data using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). He explained that because there was already “research and theory on the pedagogical practices of effective teachers of African American students,” he used a grounded theory approach “to relate the findings to the existing theories and provide additional descriptions, different interpretations, and contextual accounts to those theories” (p. 185).

Howard confirmed that teachers used “holistic instructional strategies, culturally consistent communicative competencies, and skill-building strategies to promote academic success” and was able to provide further description of those actions (p. 186). His first finding was that the teachers’ use of holistic instructional strategies reflected their concern for students beyond their academic growth; the teachers were also
concerned about students’ “social, emotional, and moral growth” (p. 186). Howard’s second finding was that the language teachers used in the classroom was often similar to the students’ home language; he referred to this as “culturally consistent communicative competencies” (p. 186). He explained that “the teachers structured discourse patterns, phrases, person-to-person interactions, and vocabulary in their classrooms in ways consistent with many of the communication modes their students used at home” (p. 190). The teachers explained that they encouraged students to use their cultural language if it supported them in expressing their learning or making cognitive connections in learning new material. The third finding was that these teachers were successful in supporting students’ academic skills. A significant part of the teachers’ efforts involved helping the students view academic skills as something they could acquire; many of the students initially felt they were not as smart as other students. One participant, Hazel, explained that the use of the word skill “makes it attainable. But if you use the word smart, most children interpret that as either having it or not” (p. 195). Howard’s study provides an example of teachers who did not just focus on improving students’ skills. They created a classroom environment based on students’ cultural backgrounds, which allowed for students to take risks and push beyond their current understandings so they could make gains in character development and academic achievement.

Hefflin’s (2002) study focused on the use of culturally relevant African American children’s literature. She conducted her study with a classroom teacher, Pam, in a K-8 urban school that served over 300 African American students in the eastern region of the U.S. Pam was a young teacher who taught third grade, and she was questioning how to use multicultural literature with her students while still making sure to address the
curriculum she was required to teach. Hefflin and Pam decided to work together to plan and teach a lesson that incorporated the book *Cornrows* (Yarbrough, 1979), a culturally relevant text, rather than the basal reader Pam used. Prior to planning their joint lesson, Hefflin observed a lesson in the classroom to gain a sense of Pam’s daily approach to teaching. Her observations became an integral part of their planning conversation. Hefflin had observed Pam leading students through a pre-reading activity focused on vocabulary, a whole group read aloud with various students taking turns reading, a group discussion, and finally a journal-writing activity. As a follow-up to the overall lesson, students completed three worksheets focused on vocabulary and comprehension.

Hefflin and Pam both felt that students were not fully engaged; they did not seem to make connections to the lesson delivery, activities, or the text. Hefflin created a framework which she and Pam used to both reflect on the observed lesson and plan for their new, collaborative lesson. She explained that the framework consisted of “cultural patterns,” (p. 233) which included four categories: texts related to the cultural background of students, social interaction patterns based on call and response, a connection between home and school, and a connection between the students’ individual lives and the text. As Hefflin and Pam moved through each phase of the framework, they quickly realized that much of what Pam typically did in her classroom was not connected to the students’ cultural frames of reference. For example, the text used during the observed lesson had no connection to the students’ lives or interests. Also, Pam’s interactions with the students during both the reading portion and the group discussion followed a somewhat rigid pattern with Pam asking a question and individual students providing an answer. Hefflin suggested that Pam try the call-and-response pattern of
interaction which many students were familiar with from the churches they attended. Both agreed that this more familiar pattern of communication might allow students to engage more authentically and with more meaning. They also discussed whether or not the questions they asked students before and after reading were scripted in a way that drew on the students’ cultural frames of reference. For example, in planning the new lesson, Hefflin and Pam discussed the difference in asking students about their experiences having their hair “cornrowed” versus “fixed,” and they noted that the former had a stronger cultural connection (p. 240). Finally, they also discussed whether or not the lessons and activities drew on the students’ personal lives. Since most of these engagements focused on vocabulary or comprehension, the students used very little of their personal experiences to engage in the text. This reflective conversation between Hefflin and Pam served as an impetus for Pam to revise her approach and create a new lesson around the text Cornrows (Yarbrough, 1979).

One significant change occurred in the pre-reading activity. Instead of focusing on vocabulary in the text, Pam had the students think about the title of the text and make predictions about what might take place in the text based on their own experiences. This discussion allowed students to discuss their personal experiences and also drew on their cultural knowledge as they actively discussed cornrowed hair. As she read the text aloud to her students, she relied on the call-and-response pattern as she sought reactions to the story from her students. Hefflin and Pam also revised the follow-up activity to include an illustration of “the person, object, or event” that the students were “most reminded of during the reading” (p. 246). This experience allowed for a final connection to the students’ home lives as many of them drew pictures of their mothers or other family
members. Both Hefflin and Pam felt that the students’ engagement in the lessons with *Cornrows* was heightened because there was much more of a connection between the text, the lesson, and the students’ cultural backgrounds.

Hyland (2009) conducted a case study focused on a European American teacher, Andrea, who was in her fourth year of teaching and who wanted to become a culturally relevant teacher. Andrea was a fourth and fifth grade teacher at Lincoln Elementary School in the Midwestern region of the U.S. The school’s student population was mostly working class African American in a community that Hyland identified as “historically Black” (p. 98). Andrea realized that she was not connecting with her students, so she sought help in becoming a more effective teacher of her students. Hyland collected data over a period of two years in a series of 20 one-hour observations in Andrea’s classroom, as well as three two-hour formal interviews, and numerous conversations.

Hyland was careful to first focus on the success of Andrea’s teaching using culturally relevant practices. Hyland found that Andrea’s efforts in becoming more effective showed that she valued the community and cultural knowledge students brought to the classroom, and she wanted students to “see themselves and members of their community as experts” (p. 102). In addition, Hyland also concluded that Andrea wanted students to question the worlds they lived in and to ask critical questions, though within the first year, Andrea expressed some discomfort in this area because she worried that she was not equipped to answer the students’ questions. She eventually became comfortable with students asking questions about race or gender and encouraged them to do so as part of her project-based teaching.
Hyland’s case study of Andrea provided a close look at a teacher who understood and enacted many tenets of CRP because “her students were valued; knowledge was looked at critically; community issues were brought into the classroom. . . Andrea went against school culture and engaged her students in project-based learning and held high expectations for students” (2009, p. 103). However, even though Andrea enacted all of these beliefs through her teaching practice, she still struggled to connect with community and family members of her students. Hyland recognized that Andrea was most comfortable enacting culturally relevant teaching practices within her own classroom with her students. The only classroom connection to the community was guided by university professors or doctoral students who approached her about coming into the classroom. Though these allowed some connection to the community, she did not initiate these connections, nor did they truly draw on the students’ home communities. Andrea discussed her hesitance to talk with students about their home lives because she struggled to negotiate what she believed was right or wrong. For example, she shared a belief that parents who did not read to their children at home, as some of her students’ parents did not, were lacking as parents. Hyland explained that Andrea was aware that her “lack of openness affected her relationships with students, but she was confused about how to be ‘different’ without revealing that she was somehow better” (p. 106). Andrea also expressed her discomfort in developing relationships with her African American students’ families, saying that she was “simply more comfortable relating to White families” (p. 107).

Ladson-Billings’ *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2009) focused on the study she conducted in the late eighties and early nineties.
that provided the foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy. The study featured the work of eight elementary school teachers in a mostly African American school district in Northern California. To choose her study participants, Ladson-Billings (2009) went first to the “educational consumers” (p. 30), the parents of the students in the school, for nominations of “outstanding teachers” (1995, p. 471). The criteria parents used to identify the teachers included “being accorded respect by the teacher, student enthusiasm toward school and academic tasks, and student attitudes toward themselves and others” (1995, p. 471). Using this criteria, parents nominated “more than twenty teachers they felt passed the test” (2009, p. 30). Secondly, Ladson-Billings asked principals and other teachers to nominate teachers. The criteria they used included “excellent classroom management skills, student achievement (as measured by standardized test scores), and personal observations of teaching practice” (1995, p. 472). They, too, nominated a list of over twenty teachers. By comparing the two lists, Ladson-Billings chose her sample of nine teachers whose names appeared on both lists. Of the nine, all but one agreed to participate. The eight teachers who participated in the study had all been teaching for 12-14 years; five were African American, and three were European American (2009).

Ladson-Billings collected data in a series of four phases, beginning with interviews with the teachers, followed by unannounced observations of their classroom teaching, then videotaped recordings of teaching, and finally conversations between the participants while reviewing the videotapes. In analyzing her data, Ladson-Billings concluded that many of the beliefs the teachers held were consistent with their practices. While the teachers did not talk about their practices relative to culture, Ladson-Billings concluded their practices were what she called *culturally relevant practices*. Ladson-
Billings described culturally relevant practices as those which “produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order” (1995, p. 474).

The teachers in the study shared three characteristics. First, they believed that all students could learn and had knowledge within them. In order to draw on students’ knowledge, the teachers felt they had to be active community members who offered support through teaching. Secondly, the teachers tried to create strong relationships with students for the purpose of creating a collaborative community of learners in their classrooms (p. 480). Third, the teachers viewed students’ knowledge as something that was constantly evolving and worked to “build bridges” for students that would “facilitate learning” (p. 481) and allow students to demonstrate various forms of knowledge.

Moyo (2009) conducted a study within ten schools in a rural, public school district in the southeastern region of the U.S. Moyo wanted to understand: “1. How is culturally responsive pedagogy promoted in kindergarten classrooms and the school culture as a whole? 2. What constraints and challenges do teachers face in implementing culturally responsive pedagogy?” (p. 22). To collect data, Moyo conducted observations and interviews. Kindergarten classrooms were the “target grade level” (p. 119) that she observed, though she did conduct observations in other grade levels as well. She did not include the length or frequency of observations, though she explained that she was regularly present in the various schools for a period of nine months to a year. Moyo conducted both structured and semi-structured interviews with eight kindergarten teachers who were randomly selected from the ten schools.
Overall, the eight teachers felt the use of culturally responsive teaching was necessary to serve the student population in the school. However, much of what the teachers implemented as culturally responsive practices included more surface-level strategies such as classroom decorations, the availability of books focused on diverse cultures, and the general awareness of diversity within the student population. Moyo recognized these teaching practices as being first steps toward implementing more meaningful culturally responsive practices. The teachers noted a number of hindrances to their use of these teaching practices, which included:

- Few culturally diverse teachers
- Inadequate college preparation on the part of some teachers for culturally diverse learners
- Standardized tests/Teaching to the test
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and prescriptive curriculum and pedagogy
- Poverty issues
- Inadequate Knowledge of Culturally Responsive Issues
- Inadequate Family and Community Involvement

Moyo concluded that even when teachers believed in culturally relevant teaching strategies, there were often obstacles that kept teachers from fully implementing the strategies, whether it was a lack of knowledge or confidence in different cultural frameworks or school guidelines. Though the teachers in the study were not successful in fully implementing culturally relevant teaching strategies, they were taking first steps and
recognized the need and possible benefit of the change in their teaching approach. Moyo concluded that teachers needed continued professional learning and support in culturally relevant teaching, as well as the authority and flexibility to make decisions about the curriculum and materials they use to teach their students.

Bondy, Ross, Hambacher, and Acosta (2012) conducted a study focusing on warm demanders, a concept tied to culturally relevant teaching. Bondy et al. defined warm demanding “as a feature of culturally relevant teaching that is characterized by culturally relevant, critical care, and authority” (p. 441). They traced the evolution of the term warm demander, citing Kleinfeld’s (1975) study as the first to use the terminology when discussing the work of teachers of Eskimo and Alaskan Indian children. Later, the term appeared again in Vazquez’s (1988) study of minority children, and was connected specifically to African American children in Irvine and Fraser’s (1998) study. They also relied on Ware’s (2006) framework of warm demanders, focusing on two aspects—“the warm demander as caregiver and authority figure” (p. 422).

Their study focused specifically on European American first-year teachers as they tried to implement culturally relevant teaching practices by being warm demanders in a low-income, predominately African American elementary school. The researchers videotaped the teachers three times followed by interviews in which the teachers reflected on their teaching practices and specific efforts to be warm demanders in the classroom.

The researchers found that even though both participants graduated from the same teacher education program and conducted internships in the same school where they were employed, the two had very different understandings of what the role of warm demander meant in action. Alyson, who taught first grade, had a much more “holistic” (Bondy et
al., 2012, p. 433) view of being a warm demander, seeing it as a way she could approach her students learning and behavior. Dianna, a fourth grade teacher, viewed warm demanding as an approach to classroom management rather than as an approach to all of her interactions with students. The major difference between the two teachers was that Alyson seemed to have stronger connections with students because she was more attuned to their perceptions of her caring and authority in the classroom. She focused a great deal on their reactions, while Dianna was more focused on her own actions to enact care and authority rather than paying attention to how the students perceived her.

**Middle school teachers.** Tate’s (1995) study focused on a middle school teacher’s culturally relevant pedagogy. It took place in a mathematics classroom in an urban, mainly African American, middle school in southwestern U.S. Sandra Mason, the teacher featured in the study, taught in her school’s “laureate program designed to meet the needs of children identified as gifted in some area of school” (p. 169). Mason’s class was not regulated by state-driven standards or curriculum, which meant she was able to create curriculum that best fit her students’ needs. Tate collected data in two phases—an examination of documents that typified Mason’s teaching practices and an interview with Mason.

Mason explained that her program focus was on solving community problems rather than being based on mathematics content. The students then researched a community problem and worked to create possible solutions, before eventually attempting to implement their solutions. This approach led to the students’ exploration of very realistic and difficult issues in their communities, including “the AIDS epidemic, drugs, ethics in medicine, [and] sickle cell anemia” (1995, p. 170). For example, in one
project, students worked to “close and/or relocate 13 liquor stores within 1000 feet of their school” (p. 170). In order to complete this project, the students examined various laws and codes and found that the laws gave “tax advantages and other fiscal incentives for liquor stores” (p. 170) that were in the area near their school. The students then brainstormed possible changes to the incentive program they would later propose to city officials. They also used state beverage codes to look for possible violations that the various liquor stores were making. The students met with their city’s planning commission and their city council, with whom they shared prepared speeches explaining why the liquor stores should have to relocate. Their story was published in the local newspaper, and they also went to their state capital; this led to the story being reported by the Associated Press. After all of the students’ work, local police gave over 200 citations to the various liquor store owners due to violations. Two of the stores closed because of major infractions. The students’ work also led to the city council’s “resolution that liquor not be consumed within 600 feet of the school” (p. 171). Based on the data he collected, Tate concluded that Mason’s teaching practices were based on “(a) communication between students, teacher, and outside entities; (b) cooperative group work; (c) investigative research throughout the learning process; (d) questioning content, people, and institutions; (e) open-end problem solving connected to students realities; and (f) social action” (p. 172). Tate explained that Mason’s teaching strategies “represent[ed] efforts to ‘center’ her students in the process of acquiring knowledge for social change” (p. 172).

Lynn, Johnson, and Hassan (1999) used the context of CRP to study the teaching practices of a middle school teacher, Kamal Hassan. The case study of Hassan was “an
exploratory investigation of the beliefs and practices of one African American teacher who exemplified” the commitment to “transform not only the minds but also the lives of [his] African American students” (p. 42). The study was pulled from a much larger ethnographic study that examined the practices of African American teachers in the Los Angeles, California area. It took place at a private school, La Cienga Middle School, in an “affluent African American community” (p. 42) in South Los Angeles called Baldwin Hills. The study was collaborative in design, based on participatory research, in which the researcher, Lynn, and two teachers, Johnson and Hassan, worked together to design and conduct the study. They collected data from classroom observations, individual and group interviews, and informal conversations over a period of nine months in 1998 and 1999. Additionally, the researchers examined documents including “newspaper articles, statements pertaining to the school’s mission, and written material describing the school” (p. 48). They also conducted a semi-structured group interview with school leaders, including the founder, head of school, and campus director for the purpose of gaining an understanding of how the school was started and their vision for students and curriculum.

The school was begun by a group, the New Visions Foundation, whose goal was to create a private school setting that mirrored the diversity of the community it would serve. Therefore, each school was required to “enroll a minimum of 40% students of color” (1999, p. 45). In addition, the school itself was based on the following values:

- Encouraging teachers and families to participate in the construction of curriculum and other matters traditionally decided upon by the administration
• Providing students with opportunities to nurture their artistic as well as their academic faculties

• Utilizing the community as a resource from which to build curricula and create stronger bonds between community and school

• Teaching students to respect and honor their unique cultures while recognizing the importance and value of cultural diversity; and

• Helping students become highly principled and compassionate human beings endowed with the critical thinking skills that will serve to foster positive social transformation

(p. 46).

Lynn et al. (1999) concluded that Hassan often made connections between teaching and the ministry, arguing that “teachers . . . are charged to change lives and save souls” (p. 49). He combined an “emphasis on deep-seated moralism, beneficent opportunism, and healthy pessimism” (p. 49). The researchers considered lessons on social justice and human rights as evidence of moralism. They detailed several lessons and class discussions that Hassan taught focused on the impact of oppression around the world, specifically focused on race and racism. Beneficent opportunism referred to the message Hassan conveyed that African American leaders can reveal injustices directed toward their community while simultaneously pointing out the way society as a whole could improve if the injustice or ill treatment stopped. The researchers found that Hassan used this opportunistic approach often during his teaching as he fully valued all that students said during class discussions. No matter how naïve or misguided their comments were, Hassan used what they contributed and pushed them to think more
critically about their own assumptions, furthering their overall thinking. Finally, the researchers also noted pessimism in Hassan’s teaching, which they defined as an understanding that no amount of work would fully solve social injustices simply because of how powerful hegemonic structures are in larger society. From interview data, the researchers concluded that Hassan felt worried that his teaching would not have enough of an impact on his students or society. However, this pessimism seemed to fuel Hassan’s teaching practice because though he may have felt that his impact was small, he continued to encourage students to question the world they lived in.

Milner (2008) conducted a study for a period of two years at Bridge Middle School, which was a southeastern, urban, public middle school. He set out to gain a sense of “the nature of the teachers and students’ culture in the school,” (p. 1578) particularly because it was an urban school. Milner shared three counter-narratives of teachers, Mr. Jackson, an African American male, Mr. Hall, a European American male, and Ms. Shaw, an African American female. His purpose in creating these counter-narratives was to illustrate how their varied teaching practices led to student learning and growth.

During the study, Milner was present in the school at least a half a day each week, though at times he was present for up to two days. He collected data through classroom observations, artifacts and documents, including lesson plans, assignments, and assessments, and interviews. He talked with each teacher individually one to two times to learn how they achieved success in an urban school setting.

An undercurrent of Milner’s study was that the teachers and students had different cultural backgrounds, but they were still able to connect in a way that led to learning. For
example, Mr. Jackson was able to create a “‘hook’” (2008, p. 1593) through the use of hip-hop music that led to a stronger relationship with students which increased their engagement and overall learning. Mr. Hall succeeded in building relationships with his students by engaging in conversation with them about their out-of-school interests, athletic pursuits in particular. Also, Mr. Hall shared with his students that, like many of them, he grew up in a situation of poverty. This positioned him as similar to the students in his classroom. Finally, Ms. Shaw added another component—the “importance of helping students develop character, community, and mindsets to change injustice and to improve the students’ communities” (p. 1594). This element of critical teaching was important in understanding Ms. Shaw’s approach to teaching. As Milner explained, she “clearly recognized that students’ in-school realities were shaped and constructed by outside forces such as the media, social expectations, and the ever-ingrained pressure to acquire material possessions” (p. 1594). Milner did not set out to uncover culturally relevant teaching practices that these teachers were attempting to implement. Instead, culturally relevant practices seemed to emerge as he worked to discover why teachers of urban schools were successful.

**High school teachers.** Dillon’s (1989) study was conducted to uncover the “social organization” of a high school English class identified as a “low-track” class (p. 230). Her research approach was a micro-ethnography which she described as “an intensive study of a subset of a larger cultural system” (p. 230). The school was located in a rural region of southeastern U.S. There were 17 “predominantly black students (6 male and 11 female) com[ing] from a variety of academic backgrounds and family structures” (p. 232). Dillon described them as having “low-reading ability” and being
part of a “low socioeconomic level” (p. 232). Their teacher was Mr. Appleby, “a white, middle class, 38-year-old male” (p. 233). Dillon used the following research questions to guide the study:

1. What is the nature of the social organization in the observed classroom?

2. What verbal and nonverbal actions/patterns of action does the teacher display as he interacts with students that have low-reading ability? How does the context of the learning situation/social organization influence the teacher’s actions/patterns of action?

3. How does the teacher perceive and interpret his own actions in various contexts involving students that have low-reading ability? Does the teacher perceive his actions changing when working with students that have average or above average reading ability?

4. How do the students in the observed class and administrators of the school perceive and interpret the actions of the teacher during lesson interactions? (p. 230).

Dillon (1989) collected data over a year-long period in two phases. The first, which she called an “exploratory phase,” (p. 234) included data from field notes and recorded and transcribed lessons, which she collected “from September through February on a weekly and 2-week basis” (p. 234). In the months of March through May, Dillon was a participant-observer in the classroom daily. As a participant observer, Dillon also spoke often with three “informants” who she selected because “they were representative of the observed class membership in respect to different achievement levels, social class and race, and they were willing to talk openly” (p. 234). Dillon also spoke with Mr.
Appleby daily which provided reflective data from his perspective about factors in the classroom. In the second phase, Dillon conducted interviews with school administrators, the three students she originally conversed with, and Mr. Appleby. During this phase, Dillon had Mr. Appleby answer three questionnaires, and she also collected “documents/artifacts including census reports, the high school self-study evaluation, lesson plans, assignments, and tests” (p. 234).

Dillon’s major finding was that the students and Mr. Appleby created the classroom organization together. Mr. Appleby also “worked to bridge students’ home culture with school culture” (1989, p. 236). Specifically, Dillon explained that Appleby “(a) established an open, risk-free environment; (b) strategically planned and structured lessons to meet the interests and needs of his students and (c) implemented lessons in which all students could be active, successful learners” (p. 237). These factors, as well as Dillon’s observation that the teacher used the “students’ cultural backgrounds as the foundation,” (p. 254) contributed to his success in creating strong, trusting relationships with his students. Dillon credited these relationships as the basis for the social organization Appleby and his students co-created in the classroom. She explained, “By releasing the typical restraints of the teacher-in-control role and the student-as-passive-learner role, effective teaching and learning were allowed to occur” (p. 254).

Lopez’s (2011) study focused on the use of CRP in a twelfth grade English classroom through the use of performance poetry. Lopez conducted the study at Millridge Secondary School in Ontario, Canada, which is a school known for its strong academic program, though there had “been issues around discipline, particularly among the racialised student body,” who Lopez defined as “students of colour (black and South
Lopez conducted her study in a twelfth grade “academic or university bound” writing class with an African-Canadian teacher, Meriah, “who used performance poetry as a way of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the curriculum” (p. 80).

Meriah conducted collaborative action research; he worked with both Lopez and other teachers in an inquiry group to improve their students’ learning through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. Lopez explained that Meriah was unhappy with the lack of engagement from her students, as well as the “‘cross-racial tensions’” (2011, p. 80) that arose at times in both her class and the school. She wanted to try implementing more culturally relevant practices in an effort to improve her students’ engagement, as well as have them consider race through a critical lens. Meriah was part of an inquiry group of teachers, which served as a “critical learning community” where ideas that may be new or difficult were critically discussed in an effort to “disrupt and acknowledge tensions” (p. 81). For Meriah, the group meetings allowed her a space to deconstruct the “complexities and tensions of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy” (p. 81).

Lopez (2011) used the following research questions to guide the study:

1. How does culturally relevant pedagogy nurture student learning, engagement, and achievement in diverse English classrooms?
2. How do culturally relevant practices inform teachers’ professional learning?
3. In what ways might critical literacy open up spaces for student engagement in diverse English classrooms?

(p. 79).

Lopez collected data from Meriah’s teaching journal, classroom observations, and inquiry-group meeting dialogue. Meriah gave the students in her class a series of poems
written by other young people. The poetry focused on “urban life in the American and Canadian context” (2011, p. 83). The students’ responses were mixed, with some feeling that the poems were “too graphic” (p. 83) while others saw the need for reading these types of texts. To further understand the students’ responses to the poetry, Meriah had the students provide written responses to the questions: “How did you feel while you were reading the poems? Were you able to relate to the experiences described? If so, how? “If not, why not?” (p. 83). Lopez explained that Meriah’s purpose for asking these questions was to try to guide the students in examining themselves in relation to the poems; this led many of them to discuss the role of race and racism in society. For some students, particularly white students, this type of discussion seemed difficult, and Lopez explained that “talking about race can be difficult in the Canadian context” (p. 83).

Lopez (2011) discussed the effort Meriah put forth to protect students by creating “a safe space where there would be no emotional wounding” (p. 83). Another lesson Meriah guided students through involved the students using words to describe the various speakers in the poems they were reading. Many of these words “like ‘gang,’ ‘drop-out,’ ‘criminal,’ ‘social misfit,’ ‘urban,’ ‘low income,’ ‘black,’ ‘single-parent,’ ‘foster home,’ ‘drugs,’ and ‘history’” (p. 84) had cultural components that led students to engage in difficult conversations.

The students’ summative assessment was to write their own performance poetry, which allowed the students to focus on how their lives connected to the worlds they lived in. Though many of the students’ poems were not based on the more urban stories of the texts they read in class, the exposure to the texts seemed to give them a more critical voice. Lopez (2011) explained that in this study, Meriah’s use of culturally relevant
teaching practices was critical because this approach to teaching “is complex work within existing school systems that do not necessarily support this kind of teaching” (p. 89). This observation, which also emerged from the inquiry group of teachers that Meriah participated in, led to an important question: “How can this level of work be sustained?” (p. 90). Lopez asserted that the time for creating and planning lessons, followed by the need to have a group of critical friends with which to reflect and discuss the lessons is essential for teachers who want to implement this type of teaching in their classrooms.

**Students’ Experiences with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

**High school students.** Wiggan (2008) conducted a study with seven high-achieving African American participants who had just graduated from high school and were freshmen attending a Georgia public, urban university. In the study, students were identified as high-achieving if they had been awarded the Hope Scholarship, which was given to students who had a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher in high school. The purpose of the study was “1) to explore the experiences of African American students, 2) understand the processes that contributed to the students’ school success, 3) and to explain the progress students believe is necessary to improve achievement across the nation” (p. 325).

Wiggan (2008) wrote that there had been a great deal of writing about weak student performance and low achievement, but “less is known about high achieving black students, or student achievement from the point of view of students themselves” (p. 325). To collect data, Wiggan had the students complete a questionnaire and participate in two interviews. Wiggan determined that there were three main factors that students credited for supporting their achievement in high school: “1) teacher practices, engaging
pedagogy; 2) participation in extracurricular activities, and; 3) the state scholarship as performance incentive” (p. 327). From the participants’ stories, Wiggan was able to identify features of teachers who supported the students’ achievement. He identified “Caring Teachers, Teamwork and Self-Direction, Interactive Teaching and Student Involvement, and Encouraging Critical Thinking” (p. 328) as factors that described teachers who positively influenced students. From this finding, Wiggan argued for the improvement of teachers’ pedagogy, specifically “caring teachers, where caring meant being committed to teaching and developing professional relationships with students” (pp. 338-339).

Sampson and Garrison-Wade’s (2011) study focused on “the preferences of African American children toward culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lessons” (p. 279) in a high school multi-grade (9-12) American history class. The research questions guiding the study were: “(1) Do African American students prefer culturally relevant or non-culturally relevant lessons in school, and; (2) How do culturally relevant lessons relate to the lives of African American students?” (p. 284). Sampson and Garrison-Wade offered three culturally relevant and three non-culturally relevant lessons over a six-week period to high school students in a “large urban high school in Colorado” (p. 285). The non-culturally relevant lessons were based on the district curriculum, while the culturally relevant lessons included “a multi-instructional approach that was experiential, and included movement, collaborative group work, technology, facilitated learning, and student-led discussions,” (pp. 284-285) as well as also being based on culturally relevant topics. The three relevant lessons were 1) a lesson titled, “The N Word,” which focused on the history of the word, discussion of current use of the word,
and student “presentations on decisions to continue to use or not use the word,” (pp. 296-297) 2) a lesson that incorporated a rap of *The Declaration of Independence*, and 3) a field trip to an African American Research Library and a tortilla factory.

To collect data, the researchers had students complete a feedback form and engage in a transition-termination group discussion. They also conducted a focus group of African American students. The researchers used the feedback form to give students an opportunity to rank the six lessons from their most to least favorite. They used the discussion group as a time for students to discuss the series of lessons and their experiences as a type of closure to the series of lessons. Finally, the researchers conducted a focus group of six African American students who would discuss their reasoning for how they ranked the lessons on the feedback form.

Both quantitative and qualitative data showed the African American students preferred the culturally relevant lessons over the non-relevant lessons. The quantitative data showed that the African American students liked “The N Word” lesson best. Based on their analysis of the qualitative data, the researchers concluded that “(1) challenging topics such as racially demeaning terminology can be enriching and stimulating; (2) lessons should be interesting and fun; and (3) teacher interaction, energy, sense of humor, and interest in the student is imperative in promoting student learning” (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011, p. 291).

Kirkland (2011) studied how an African American student responded to culturally relevant teaching in an eleventh grade English class. His study focused on a student, Derrick, and his experiences in two English units focused on *Beowulf* (2000) and *The Iliad* (Homer, 2011). Kirkland explained that he chose to focus on Derrick in the study.
because Derrick, “like many Black males his age, treaded the margins of success and failure, disaffected by school yet not completely forced out” (p. 202). His focus on Derrick was in an effort to answer the question, “How might understanding the relationships between ideology and literacy, between motive and drive, help educators more effectively engage Black male students with academic reading?” (p. 200).

During both units of study, Kirkland (2011) conducted classroom observations and talked regularly with both Derrick and his English teacher, Mr. Kegler. The unit focused on *Beowulf* (2000) took a very traditional approach. The students read the text aloud as a whole class, they completed questions that had distinct right or wrong answers, and the unit was culminated with an exam and the students watching a film version of the story. The teacher’s approach to *The Iliad* (Homer, 2011) was much different. Students first read comic books and discussed connections they had with current events, as well as the major themes of the comics, which included “racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination . . . critiquing the social consequences of difference and intolerance” (p. 202). Also, the students read *The Iliad* (Homer) in small groups, followed by discussion, and the retelling of the story in comic strip form.

Mr. Kegler’s teaching practice used a fairly common strategy for student response—the comic strip—but did so in an authentic way, validating the comic strip as a genre that students were interested in and found relevant to their lives. This change led to the students’ increased engagement in *The Iliad* (Homer) unit. From this understanding, Kirkland encouraged teachers to get to know African American male students by asking, “Who are our students, and how do their histories and deep sociologies shape who they seek to be and how they read?” (2011, p. 206). Kirkland urged educators to rethink
curriculum and text offerings so that African American males can see themselves in their school experiences.

Phillippo’s (2012) study also examined high school students’ responses to a teacher’s culturally relevant pedagogy, in particular, the development of student-teacher relationships. The study took place in three small, urban high schools in California with 34 participants over a one-year period. The participants were selected based on criteria that included “a history of disruptive behavior in class, known engagement in health or safety risk behavior, or living in substitute care” (p. 448). By choosing these students, Phillippo was able “to explore the results of teachers’ attempts to build relationships with students presumed—whether correctly or not—to be most vulnerable and in need of their support” (p. 442). The research questions guiding the study were:

1. How do students from nondominant groups perceive teachers’ efforts to develop relationships with them?
2. How do students from nondominant groups envision optimal student-teacher relationships?
3. What sociocultural or school factors promote strong student-teacher relationships or detract from them?

(p. 447).

Phillippo collected data through observations and three to four interviews with each participant. Her findings showed that the impact of teacher care on the development of relationships with students was quite complicated. While some students responded positively, others dismissed the teachers’ efforts or found them to be a nuisance.
Phillippo (2012) concluded that the two factors which had the most influence on the development of student-teacher relationships were “students’ appraisal of teachers’ everyday interactions with them and other students, and schools’ organizational and institutional contexts” (p. 451). Specifically, students focused on teachers’ knowledge of their home cultures’ and communities’ style in the classroom, which Phillippo described as “the combination of teacher support and academic press” (p. 452) consistently welcoming attitude, which she termed, “unconditional positive regard,” defined as occurring s when “one accepts the other with no hesitation or qualification” (p. 452). Participants also were concerned with whether or not teachers respected them. Their instructional skills, as well as their organization and how they “communicate and connect with students” (p. 453) all factored in to the students’ view of teachers. Finally, students focused on the “consistency between teachers’ words and their actions, their fairness and actions that supported rather than damaged students” (p. 453).

The second factor related to students’ responses toward their teachers was related to the “institutional and societal contexts” of school (Phillippo, 2012, p. 458). Because Phillippo’s participants were students who previously experienced some type of out-of-school intervention from support services (i.e., child services, medical services, law enforcement, etc.), they seemed to understand that their teachers were part of the institution of school, which was closely connected to these types of intervention. For example, if a student confided in a teacher about an abusive situation they were experiencing at home, they knew it was the teacher’s responsibility and obligation to report suspicion of harm or neglect which would increase the likelihood of further intervention in the students’ lives. Phillippo’s study provided insight into the various
factors at play in many student’s life and how those impact their relationships with teachers. She suggested a “staged model of student-teacher relationships,” which would slow the process of developing student-teacher relationships by acknowledging that prior to establishing a relationship which would allow for intervention, students need to observe and interact with their teacher in order to determine the teacher’s “trustworthiness” and “cultural responsiveness” (p 460).

**Conclusion**

Across these studies, teachers who purposefully implemented teaching strategies based on students’ cultural backgrounds all seemed to believe that all students could learn (Ladson-Billings, 2009), that the role of teacher-student relationships was integral (Ladson-Billings; Milner, 2008), and that teachers must make a cultural connection with students whether that be from first-hand knowledge of students’ cultures or genuine interest in students’ personal knowledge based on their experiences in their homes and communities (Hefflin, 2002; Milner, 2008). In addition, the teachers seemed to view their task as educating the whole child (Bondy et al., 2012; Howard, 2001; Milner) so that students’ academic skills and character were both strengthened as a result of the curriculum.

Two of the researchers (Hyland, 2009; Moyo, 2009) documented the challenges of being/becoming a culturally relevant teacher. Hyland’s study showed the difficulty a teacher had in discussing the role of issues related to race and the distance she felt in being a European American woman working with African American students. Moyo’s study discussed the school-level limitations of fully implementing teaching practices that so fully drew on students’ cultural backgrounds and knowledge.
Several studies explored the pedagogical practices found in successful classrooms. Key practices included the use of culturally-based language and speech patterns in learning engagements (Hefflin, 2002; Howard, 2001), the use of culturally relevant texts (Hefflin), and the use of authentic learning tasks that drew on students’ interests (Dillon, 1989) and that allowed them to solve social problems in their communities (Lopez, 2011; Lynn et al., 1999; Tate, 1995).

Only a few studies focused on students’ experiences in classrooms where teachers were using culturally relevant teaching practices. The findings from these studies were consistent with what was learned from studying teachers: students reported that teachers’ supportive attitudes and dispositions motivated them to engage in their learning and that learning was enhanced when teachers drew on students’ interests through text selection or topics of learning (Kirkland, 2011; Wiggan, 2008). Students responded positively when teachers demonstrated the balance between being invested in students’ personal lives and well-being (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; Wiggan) and having high expectations for students’ academic learning and success (Phillippo, 2012; Wiggan).

However, all of the studies about students were conducted with high school students—except one in which college freshman reflected on their high school experiences. There were no studies which focused on elementary or middle school students. My study contributes to the body of research on CRP by exploring the impact of culturally relevant teaching practices on middle school students in my ELA classroom, with a focus on the experiences of two African American students, as well as a focus on my experience implementing those practices.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Purpose of the Study

In order to address the need for research focused on middle grades students’ responses to culturally relevant teaching practices, I conducted a study within my seventh grade ELA class, focusing both on the entire class and on the experiences of two African American students as I tried to implement culturally relevant teaching strategies.

Research Question

The over-arching research question that guided the study was: What happens when the interests, lives, and cultural resources of middle school students are drawn upon and studied through ELA curriculum? This sub question also helped guide the study: What is the impact of a culturally relevant curriculum on two African American students’ experiences in their ELA class?

Design

My purpose in this qualitative study was to uncover what might happen for the students and me when I used students’ personal interests and cultural knowledge in planning lessons, learning activities, and curriculum. Merriam (2002) discussed the unique subjectivity of qualitative research by explaining that “qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (p. 3). In qualitative research, key participants are the people involved in the topic or problem in the natural setting where the topic or problem occurs (Lancy, 1993).
Qualitative research is inductive; “researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories” (Merriam, p. 5) in an effort to understand a phenomenon. It “focuses on the cultural, everyday, and situated aspects of human thinking, learning, knowing, acting, and ways of understanding ourselves” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 11). Qualitative research was a good fit for my study because my findings were based on the students’ and my subjective experiences in our school and classroom setting.

I initially chose a case study approach because I wanted to closely examine my students’ experiences within the context of my classroom and the school. Patton (2002) argued that “well-constructed case studies are holistic and context sensitive” (p. 447). Creswell (1998) explained that “a case study involves the widest array of data collection as the researcher attempts to build an in-depth picture” (p. 123). However, once I began collecting data, I became interested in the process of how the whole class of students responded to my attempt to use culturally relevant teaching strategies and how I revised and made new instructional decisions as a result. This cyclical process (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Lewin, 1946; Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2001) of making an instructional move, gauging student response, and then revising my instructional decision and making another move, carried on throughout the study. My attention to and interest in the reflexive nature of my teaching and students’ responses provided me with a stronger sense of which elements from my culturally relevant approach seemed to support students the most. My integral role as the practitioner in the research setting became part of the research. For these reasons, my research approach became more aligned with the characteristics of action research than case study.
Action research is contextual in that the researcher tries to gain insight about the distinctive setting and participants involved in the study, and must include details of that particular context in sharing findings (Efron & Ravid, 2013). As a member of the classroom context, I was driven to make sense of the ways in which students were responding to my teaching, and modify my approach in order to increase the students’ level of engagement. Once I was immersed in the study and involved more deeply in the process of teaching, reflecting, and modifying my instruction, I quickly realized that I was attempting to put my understanding of culturally relevant teaching into practice (Mertler, 2012) and work through my misconceptions and new understandings while still trying to support the learners in my classroom. I was engaging in the process of critical reflection as a means of adjusting my teaching, ultimately working to create a curriculum (Stenhouse, 1975) that was responsive to my students’ level of engagement. By allowing for my research approach to naturally shift from a case study approach to an action research approach, I felt I was able to glean more significant findings about my students’ responses to my instruction. In addition to focusing on my entire class of students, I collected further data with two focal students to deepen my understanding of students’ experiences in our classroom.

**Contexts**

**School site.** I conducted this study at Roundtree Middle School (RMS), which was located in the southeastern part of the country, in a large district serving both rural and suburban areas. RMS opened in August 2012 as the seventh middle school in the district. It serves the students on the west side of town, students who were previously zoned to attend a middle school that was more centrally located in the town.
In order to create small family-like communities in each grade level, the school was divided into grade-level *houses*. Sixth and seventh grade teachers looped with their students, so that, for two years, most students at RMS had the same teachers in their core subject areas. Looping contributed to the overall *house* model because teachers and students built stronger relationships, adding to the family-like atmosphere. These defining aspects of RMS set it apart in design from other schools because there was an evident focus on the importance of relationships as a foundation in the learning community. The year prior to the study, I worked as a sixth grade ELA teacher and the sixth grade house leader. Because I looped with my students, I worked as a seventh grade ELA teacher and seventh grade house leader during the time of the study. As a house leader, I taught two ELA classes each day, and I spent the remainder of the day working with teachers as an instructional coach, developing and maintaining a collaborative and reflective culture within the seventh grade house, and working as the lead interventionist for seventh graders.

The school partnered with Expeditionary Learning (EL), which is a model that supports teachers in developing and implementing authentic, meaningful projects through a cross-curricular approach. These projects, called expeditions, require students to consider problems in their immediate communities and explore these issues deeply to create possible solutions to better the world around them. This type of learning, which supports tenets of culturally relevant teaching, is thought to be more engaging and authentic for students because they can see the connections across content, as well as the immediate impact their actions have on their communities. RMS has a school designer from EL who provides professional development and instructional coaching for faculty.
Also, the contributions of EL provide an added layer of rigor and high expectations for all students.

In conjunction with these efforts, the school district implemented a grading policy founded on O’Connor’s (2009) *How to Grade for Learning, K-12*. The district-wide policy gave students a redo opportunity for summative assessments, which counted as 85% of their final course grade, while formative assessments counted 15%. Because this grading policy was based on the idea that students should have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their mastery of content, it has become part of the culture at RMS that students can redo summative assessments. Students were encouraged to take redo opportunities on summative assessments in particular, and most did take advantage of redo opportunities. As a district policy, the option of redoing summative assessments was available to all students, and the option of formatives varied throughout the school. In my classroom during the time of the study, students could redo *all* assessments, both formative and summative, and I often required that they do so after I retaught material in small groups or through individual conferences.

At the time of the study, there were 311 students in seventh grade; 241 were European American, 28 were African American, 19 were Hispanic American or Latino American, 12 were Asian American students, and 11 self-identified as being of more than one race. The percentage of students of color was extremely low, and overall, the school lacked a great deal of ethnic diversity compared to other schools in the same district. In addition, the school also lacked diversity in terms of socioeconomic status within the school since only 21% of students were on subsidized lunch plans. Similarly, the
school’s faculty which consisted of 65 teachers was comprised of 61 European Americans, three African Americans, and one Chinese American.

**Classroom.** My classroom, like all classrooms at RMS, did not have a traditional physical arrangement. One wall looked into the seventh grade house commons area and was made of glass windows. The glass windows created a true sense of transparency about what type of instruction was taking place in every classroom. This contributed to the collaborative culture of the school. In the classroom, there were tables and chairs rather than traditional desks. Two students fit comfortably at each rectangular table. All furniture was on wheels, and I often re-arranged furniture to match my instructional plans. Technological tools were a significant part of the students’ daily school experience. Every student and teacher had their own iPad which was used regularly during instruction. The classroom was equipped with an ELMO document camera, LCD projector, Apple TV, sound system, and ten laptops.

**Participants**

The participants in my study included me and all 11 students, including two focal students whose experiences I studied more deeply. I included myself as a participant because my instructional decision making, as well as my experiences in developing curriculum that explored issues of race and culture were integral to my understanding of what it means to be a culturally relevant teacher and how using culturally relevant teaching practices impacts student learning.

**Whole class.** Near the end of the students’ sixth grade year, I asked school administrators if I could teach a single-gender class the following year. I wanted to try to implement more effective teaching strategies and to use CRP to create a more inclusive
classroom community. I specifically asked that Jared, Marcus, Max, and Edward stay with me for the seventh-grade class because I felt that they might have a better experience and learn more in a class where I tried to implement culturally relevant teaching strategies. The administrators consented. They felt that the experience in a single-gender class in which I tried to implement CRP would benefit students. To create the class, other sixth grade teachers recommended students who they thought could benefit from the class I would teach. Teachers’ recommendations were based on students’ need for support in reading and writing and more one-on-one and small-group instruction. They also identified students they thought would benefit from being in a smaller class. Teachers recommended 11 students and after obtaining their parents’ permission to be in a single-gender class, the class was formed. Of the 11 students, there were five African American students, one Latino student, and six European American students. Ten of the students were 12 years old and turned 13 years old during the school year, while one, Aaron, was 13 years old and turned 14. Because I was looping to seventh grade with the students, I knew them all, though I only taught four of the students as sixth graders—Marcus, Jared, Max, and Edward. Jared and Marcus are African American, Max is European American, and Edward is Latino. I knew early on that I wanted Jared and Marcus to be a major focus of my study, but because I was trying to implement CRP, which is founded on developing relationships with students, I felt it necessary to also have Edward and Max join the class. During their sixth-grade year, I had also established what I considered strong relationships with both students and their families. The 11 students in the class were at somewhat varying levels in reading and writing, evident from their standardized test scores (see Table 3.1) as sixth graders.
Table 3.1  
Students' State Standardized Assessment Scores and Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>ELA Test Score/Level</th>
<th>Writing Test Score/Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>627/Met</td>
<td>640/Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>575/Not Met</td>
<td>543/Not Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>569/Not Met</td>
<td>588/Not Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan</td>
<td>552/Not Met</td>
<td>600/Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>569/Not Met</td>
<td>580/Not Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>674/Met</td>
<td>648/Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>674/Exemplary</td>
<td>647/Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td>603/Met</td>
<td>634/Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>603/Met</td>
<td>605/Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>617/Met</td>
<td>565/Not Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>633/Met</td>
<td>600/Met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four students scored Not Met on the state standardized test in ELA, meaning they scored below the cut score of 600. Six students scored Met, and one scored Exemplary. On the state standardized writing test the previous year, four students scored Not Met, seven scored Met, and none scored Exemplary. Three students received extra support in reading through the school’s Response to Intervention (RTI) program, one had an individualized education plan and had two class periods of special services in reading and math, and one was identified as an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) student who spent one period each day with the ESOL teacher for extra support in all subject areas.

The curriculum was founded on the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards, and, because of district requirements, the learning targets and lesson objectives based on the standards were the same as in other seventh grade ELA classrooms. However, it was my plan to work within those requirements to create a
classroom that was dependent on my students’ interests and cultural resources by using culturally relevant texts, focusing on issues of race, creating strong relationships with my students, and valuing the cultural resources they brought into the classroom.

**Focal students.** Though all 11 of my students experienced the same classroom engagements, and I did observe the responses of the whole class, I focused closely on the experiences of two African American students, Jared and Marcus. I had an established relationship with them and their families, since I taught them during their previous year of school. Throughout their sixth grade year, I talked with their parents often about the students’ classroom performance and their adjustment to middle school expectations. By the end of the school year, I had established what I considered a fairly strong relationship with the students’ parents. Because of these reasons, I felt they were good candidates for the study. While they were in the sixth grade, I noticed that Jared and Marcus seemed to be aware of social dynamics related to culture and race and seemed to be trying to find their place within the school community. Many of the interactions I had with them led me to ask questions about how race and identity were interwoven and how literacy was a lived, sociocultural practice. As their teacher, I felt a sense of urgency to learn more about culturally relevant teaching and to try to develop a literacy curriculum that spoke to students like Jared and Marcus, which is why I chose them as my two focal students.

**Jared.** Jared was a very conscientious student who was always concerned with whether or not he was completing assignments or assessments correctly. He liked to receive regular feedback as he made progress on any task. Jared was also a skilled basketball player who played on the school’s team, and he also had a great deal of confidence in being in front of the class or involved in performances in the school. He
was the oldest of three boys, and his two younger brothers attended the neighboring elementary school. Jared lived with both his mother and father in a nearby subdivision where many other students lived. He was also on the school’s subsidized meal plan, and received free breakfast and lunch each day.

As a reader, Jared was able to recall many of the minor details in a text. This strength could at times also present a challenge because his focus on details sometimes interfered with his synthesizing a big picture summary of the text. His reading was not always fluent, and he often repeated words or phrases of the text multiple times. Jared was very particular in wanting to make sure the text sounded right, which sometimes got in the way of his overall understanding of texts because he was too concerned with saying words correctly rather than drawing meaning from the text. As a writer, Jared had concrete ideas for the texts he wrote and thought about and planned what he would write in detail before starting to actually produce writing. An area in which he still needed to grow, however, was revising his writing and making sure that every sentence truly meant what he wanted it to mean and made sense.

In my ELA class as a sixth grader, Jared’s grade fluctuated from an A to a C and back to a B. Jared’s fifth grade state standardized assessment data showed him scoring a 587, Not Met, in ELA and a 663, Exemplary, in Writing. His MAP scores during his sixth grade year declined slightly. He began the year with the Fall 2012 administration in the 36th percentile, dropped to the 13th percentile at Winter 2013 administration, and then finished the year in the 31st percentile at the Spring 2013 administration.

The elementary school RTI team had identified Jared as needing Tier 1 intervention as a fourth grader. The interventions included independent reading of just
right books and rereading of familiar books. As a fifth grader, he was moved to Tier 2, and he participated in small group fluency instruction. He began his sixth grade year in both the RTI reading and math programs, which meant he had no encore classes, such as P.E. or art. Jared’s mother requested early in the year that he be released from at least one of the RTI classes, so that he would have an opportunity to take an encore class. The RMS RTI team decided within the first month of school to release him from both for a trial period to see how he did in terms of his test scores and classroom performance. The team did not feel the Tier 2 program was helping Jared enough to warrant his continuation in the class. Instead, the team felt having encore class opportunities could make school more engaging for Jared, which would then improve his overall performance. Though his mother was hesitant, she agreed.

At the beginning of his sixth grade year, Jared seemed to be finding his place in the middle school setting. In the classroom, he became involved in regular classroom distractions and off-task behaviors of other students such as talking about off-topic things during group or independent work time, playing games on his iPad during class, and becoming distracted if other students were off task and being redirected by the teacher. Within the first couple of months of his sixth grade year, Jared began to take all opportunities to redo assessments or revise work in both ELA and other classes. He balanced this extra effort in his academic work while still being very much accepted by his peers. Because of his hard work, teachers nominated him as a Citizen Scholar which was a monthly award to recognize students who seem to be living the Expeditionary Learning design principles. Jared was also recognized at the end-of-year awards program because he received an Outstanding Achievement award in both ELA and math.
I wanted to ensure that our school supported and valued Jared’s cultural background as an African American, rather than overlooking it because he was finding academic success. Jared often asked questions that showed me he was really considering how race and culture are lived practices. For instance, during a discussion about denotation versus connotation, he asked, “Was that like when people use the n-word to talk about Black people?” I wanted to provide Jared with learning experiences that gave him the chance to explore his culture tied to literacy so that he would know and be able to articulate the contributions from African Americans to our shared history and literary experiences.

**Marcus.** Marcus had great leadership potential among his peers; his peers looked up to him and sought his attention and approval. He was a star basketball player on the school’s team, played on the school’s football team, and had a sense of humor that was beyond his 12 years. He lived with his mother, and he had an older brother, who graduated high school and attended college out of state on a basketball scholarship. Marcus’ father lived in a nearby town, but Marcus did not see him often. His father remarried and had two children. I came to know his mother well during his sixth grade year. In our conversations about Marcus, I learned that he had expressed feelings that his dad left him and his mother to start a new family which she explained was one of the reasons why he struggled with behavior in school. Marcus received free breakfast and lunch, and was always with a group of friends in the cafeteria before school and at lunch. Outside of school, he was part of a community basketball league with whom he competed every weekend, often traveling around the state to play in tournaments. His basketball
coaches were very involved with him, and they occasionally came to school to check in with how he was doing academically and socially.

As a sixth grader in my ELA class, Marcus steadily held a C-average each quarter. He was reluctant to read, and I struggled to find books he found engaging, though he was somewhat interested in non-fiction texts about sports, especially books about specific athletes. Marcus was a fairly fluent reader and was successful in decoding new words. He could provide a detailed retelling of a text, but the meaning sometimes broke down when he was answering questions that required synthesis of multiple parts of a text or multiple texts on a topic. As a writer, across his sixth grade year, Marcus came to understand and follow the writing process of drafting, revising, and publishing. Marcus resisted revising his writing at the start of the school year, but by the end, he realized that once he completed a draft, he was not finished with the writing. He understood and willingly sought out revision opportunities and my feedback because he saw how these extra steps impacted his class grade.

As a third grader, Marcus’ teachers began Tier 1 interventions that included independent reading of *just right* books. As a fourth grader, this Tier 1 intervention and another, rereading familiar books, was added. As a fifth grader, he was moved to Tier 2 and received intervention through small group comprehension strategy instruction. As a fifth grader, Marcus’ standardized test data from the state standardized assessment showed that he scored a 570 in ELA, which was 30 points below the “meeting standard” cut score of 600. In writing, however, he scored a 594, which was much closer to the cut score of 600 for “meeting standard.” His Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) score showed a decline during his fifth grade year from scoring in the 36th percentile to the 14th
percentile. He remained in this area on MAP throughout sixth grade, beginning the year in Fall 2012 scoring in the 16th percentile, improving to the 24th percentile after the Winter 2013 administration, but then dropping to the 12th percentile by the final administration in Spring 2013. The RMS RTI team determined that he should continue Tier 2 interventions as a sixth grader, and he was enrolled in Allen’s (2012) *Plugged Into Reading* as a class in place of another encore class such as P.E. or art. *Plugged Into Reading* was the intervention program used for all middle school students identified as Tier 2. Unfortunately, the use of Tier 2 interventions did not help Marcus in terms of his performance on standardized tests. For example, his MAP Reading assessment scores since beginning in third grade had been between 194 and 204; he had steadily remained in the bottom quartile of students in his grade. As an intervention, *Plugged Into Reading*, did not necessarily address Marcus’ needs as a reader. To grow as a reader, he needed to read many texts that he could connect with and find success with, and he needed to have a trusting relationship with the teacher providing the intervention so that he would be willing to take risks in working on both his use of comprehension strategies, as well as fluency and word attack skills. After getting to know Marcus, I understood that he needed to feel cared for and valued in his learning environment for him to truly engage in the learning activities that would help him grow. Because reading intervention classes had not been helpful for Marcus, the RMS intervention team decided not to continue intervention services but instead to give him a class like outdoor education instead. I am a part of the RMS team and supported this decision. I was going to have Marcus in my ELA class and believed I could help him as a reader and a writer.
My sense was that in the sixth grade Marcus was working out who he would be in the middle school setting of RMS, where he fit within the social dynamics, and how he would get along with peers and teachers. For the first half of his sixth grade year, in all of his classes, Marcus resisted participating or engaging in learning activities, refused redirection, argued with teachers, and eventually opted out of learning all together. Initially, teachers tried to get through to Marcus by giving him a great deal of positive feedback and encouragement, by conferring with him about behavior, by using a behavior report card that allowed for daily feedback on positive behaviors, by making frequent contact with his mother, and by talking often with his basketball coach. Finding that these strategies were not working, teachers eventually began referring him to the discipline office for these types of incidents, and that resulted in either lunch detention, in-school suspension, or out-of-school suspension. On more than one occasion, he made comments about race early in his sixth grade year, implying that the teachers, including me, treated him differently because he was African American. For example, after getting into a physical altercation with another student in my classroom, he said upon leaving the classroom with the assistant principal, “Y’all just treat me different because I’m black.” This struck me in particular because I tried to always be aware of cultural differences, and I immediately questioned whether or not he was right.

About halfway through the school year, things improved greatly and Marcus seemed to relax in terms of how he worked to position himself in the classroom with the teacher and among peers. What began as defensiveness and a harder exterior seemed to mellow, becoming more of a confidence in both himself and a belief that his teachers cared about him and wanted him to find academic success.
As I reflect on the learning experiences I provided Marcus during his sixth grade year, I question how much opportunity I gave him to truly explore who he was and how he fit into both the school community and larger society in his racial identity as an African American. I believe that Marcus understood and was concerned about racial differences and inequalities. I asked for Marcus to be in my classroom in 7th grade because I believed he could find academic success in our school setting if his personal interests and cultural resources were drawn upon in creating the curriculum. I wanted to see if my very intentional efforts to provide a more culturally-responsive curriculum in his ELA class might have an impact on him.

**Relationship to participants.** Though I only taught four of my 11 students in the year prior, I felt that during the fall semester, I developed what I considered to be strong relationships with all of the students in the class. The small nature of the class allowed for more interpersonal interaction and let me work more often with individual students, during which time I also learned about their families and lives outside of school. Additionally, the students knew that I cared very much about their well-being and success, both academically and socially in our school because I often checked on their progress in other classes and talked with them about relationships and interactions with classmates and other teachers. Nevertheless, the students and I were still immersed in our regular school setting with our traditional school expectations for one another as students and teacher.

In terms of race and gender, I was positioned in a significant way because I was not similar to all of the students. While my class was a mix of African American, European American, and Latino male students, I am a European American female. As a
European American woman, I fit the traditional model of a teacher in U.S. public schools. Hancock (2011) reported that “65.1 percent of all elementary and middle school teachers (grades 1-8) . . . are White women” (p. 96). This statistic was significant in my study because for the majority of my students’ school careers, they have been accustomed to having a European American woman teacher. I was very aware of this difference, and though I intended to position myself as a learner in the study, my position of power and authority cannot be denied. However, it was my intention to position all of the students, the two focal students in particular, in a way that allowed me to learn from them about issues regarding their school experiences, culture, and learning.

I felt that the previously established relationship I had with the two focal students would benefit me as I tried to understand their perceptions of school and their place in it in more depth than their other classmates. I assumed that the level of trust would be fairly strong as a result of our familiarity with one another as student and teacher. However, I am very aware that my position as their teacher may have impacted what the students told me. At the beginning of the study, both Jared and Marcus were somewhat hesitant to speak openly and honestly during interviews because as students they were both aware of saying or doing what the teachers deemed as right.

**Data Gathering Methods**

Qualitative research encompasses varied methods for data collection, including conducting interviews, keeping field notes during class observations, and collecting documents particular to the study for further analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Patton (2002) further explained that a researcher’s findings in a qualitative study emerge from three specific types of data: “in-depth, open-ended interviews; direct observation; and
written documents” (p. 4). My data collection included my researcher’s journal where I took notes of the daily events of my time with students, their responses, and the frequent informal conversations that occurred before, during, and after class. I also recorded classroom observations via video camera, collected learning artifacts, and conducted interviews of the two focal students (see Figure 3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data focused on my experience</th>
<th>Data focused on my entire class’ responses to instruction</th>
<th>Data focused on two focal students: Marcus and Jared</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research journal notes</td>
<td>Research journal notes</td>
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<td>Classroom observations</td>
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<td>Interviews</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Learning artifacts</td>
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*Figure 3.1: Data Collection Methods*

I collected data from December 2013 to May 2014 and analyzed the collected data and wrote my dissertation from June 2014 to April 2015.

**Research timeline.** Below is a research timeline showing the process of data collection, analysis, and writing.

December 2013

- Met with participants to provide overview of study, got parental consent

January 2014

- Conducted initial interview with each participant
- Completed classroom observations with video recording
- Transcribed interviews and coded
- Transcribed classroom observations and coded
February 2014
- Conducted classroom observations with video recording
- Transcribed classroom observations and coded

March 2014
- Conducted second interview with each participant
- Conducted classroom observations with video recordings
- Transcribed interviews and coded
- Transcribed classroom observations and coded

April 2014
- Conducted classroom observations with video recording
- Transcribed classroom observations and coded

May 2014
- Conducted third interview with each participant
- Conducted classroom observations with video recordings
- Transcribed interviews and coded
- Transcribed classroom observations and coded

June 2014-May 2015
- Further analysis across all data
- Determined findings
- Writing

**Observations.** I video recorded classroom engagements in my ELA class period, which lasted 55 minutes, at least twice each week from January to May 2014. Initially, my purpose for video recordings was to collect data that showed how the students and I
interacted and how they interacted with one another. On a second level, the video-recorded observations provided evidence of the types of learning opportunities I offered in the classroom and how the students responded and engaged in them. I used the video recordings to reflect on my instruction during the study and evaluated how the students responded to the culturally relevant teaching practices I tried to implement through engagement or disengagement.

In particular, the class observations captured some of the class’ defining rituals and characteristics such as a class creed that we co-created and recited daily to begin our time together, a text-rich setting that pushed students to read and write authentic texts, and regular connections to athletics and music. There was a regular component of physical activity, whether it was time in the gym for a few minutes of basketball, a walk around the school, or other games or team-building challenges. I believed that the participants needed time to move during the day, and that with some time to engage in physical activity together as a group, their overall school performance could improve. In addition, I captured lessons focused on traditional topics studied in a middle level ELA class, including the ways in which we alter language depending on audience and context, the analysis of argumentative articles to determine claim and counterclaim, the genre of argument writing, the genre of writing to a prompt, the analysis of figurative language in poetry, the analysis of author’s tone and mood, as well as various smaller lessons such as word study and revising and editing writing.

While watching the recorded observations, I took reflective notes in my researcher’s journal, which helped me expand upon any notes I previously took immediately following lessons or engagements. Additionally, the use of a video
recording allowed me to revisit aspects of the classroom experience, the learning engagements offered, and the students’ participation and response to the instruction. After watching the video recording observations, I selectively transcribed pertinent pieces of data that contributed to my overall understanding of my research question and sub-questions. The digital video footage was stored on my computer, and the files were organized by date and lesson topic.

**Interviews.** I conducted semi-structured interviews with both focal students at the beginning of data collection, at a mid-point, and again near the end of data collection (Glesne, 2011). The use of interviews allowed me to gain insight into students’ perspectives on their experiences in middle school. Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) explained that the use of interview as a data collection method “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (p. 1). To record data during interviews with the students, I used an audio-recording device, and I also took notes. Following each interview, I transcribed the recording for later analysis. I used predetermined questions (see Appendix A) to guide the interviews (King & Horrocks, 2010), and I asked follow-up questions or questions that were relevant to the time period or context following certain learning activities (Glesne).

**Students’ learning artifacts.** I also collected samples of the focal students’ work and artifacts from their learning. The purpose of collecting artifacts from their learning engagements was to make connections between interview and observation data based on the artifacts or products the student participants created. The artifacts provided evidence to support their thoughts about themselves as readers and writers. Throughout the study,
I kept these artifacts in my researcher’s notebook, which had a section for each focal student.

**Organization of Data**

Before I began to collect data, I created a series of folders on my computer for keeping files organized. I created a folder for the class observations where I stored the digital video recordings, which were named by date and lesson topic. As I watched the digital videos, I continued to make notes in my researcher’s journal as addendums to the previously recorded notes I made immediately following the lessons or engagements. I transcribed pertinent sections of classroom observation data using NVivo and stored the digital clips and their transcriptions within the software program labeled by date and lesson topic. I also added hard copies of the transcriptions labeled by date and lesson topic to my researcher’s notebook.

I also used NVivo to store the audio recordings of the focal students’ interviews, as well as the transcription of those interviews. Both the recordings and transcriptions were labeled with the focal students’ names and the date of each interview. In my researcher’s notebook, I created a section for each of the two focal students. In each section, I collected interview recordings, hard copies of interview transcriptions, notes from interviews, and hard copies of digital images of learning artifacts. I organized the collected learning artifacts in sequential order by date and labeled each with the lesson or assessment topic for future reference. I also added hard copies of my interview notes, identified by date, to each focal student’s section in my researcher’s notebook.
Data Analysis

I used the qualitative software program, NVivo, to assist me in data analysis. I entered the various pieces of data (classroom observation digital recordings and transcriptions, interview audio recordings and transcriptions, and images of the focal students’ learning artifacts) into NVivo and coded them within the software program. Initially, I surveyed all of the data and recognized numerous topics in the data (See Figure 3.2), which gave me an early sense of what was present in the data.

- Stereotypes
- Evidence of student understanding
- Student not participating
- Student brings up race
- Teacher attempts to bring up race
- Differences based on race
- Discussion of race
- Awareness of race
- Language
- Classroom context
- Evidence of community
- Student ownership of lesson
- Typical English Language Arts topic
- Curriculum draws on interests
- Recognizing race
- Student perception of teacher race
- View of self
- Student-teacher relationship
- Teacher-made assumptions
  - Class structures or activities
  - Experienced learning or success
- Negative experiences in ELA
- Positive experiences in ELA
- Help from a teacher
- Comparing to other students

Figure 3.2: Initial Topics in the Data

After I had a sense of what was present in the data I collected as a whole, I used data-driven coding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) to develop a coding system for analyzing the various pieces of collected data from the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I drew on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) as I analyzed the data and constructed codes. First, I focused just on the classroom observation data and the notes I took in my researcher’s journal immediately following lessons. Within both of these sets of data, I
coded my instructional moves to determine the types of instructional decisions I was making and how students responded. Initially, I coded for the specific instructional focuses (See Figure 3.3) of my teaching.

- Study of language
  - Language at home
  - Language in media (sports coverage)
  - Formal language
  - Language between friends
  - Language related to race and culture
- Argument Writing
- Connections to athletics
  - Establishing classroom norms
  - Mentor texts based on sports
  - Competitive play
- Class Creed
- Student groups and partnerships
- Non-academic activity
- Culturally-relevant texts
- Challenging stereotypes

*Figure 3.3: Specific Instructional Focuses*

Next, I regrouped these codes into broader themes with corresponding instructional focus codes (See Figure 4.4) to gain a clearer understanding of the large-scale instructional moves I was making throughout the study.

- Drew on students’ lives and interests
  - Study of language
    - Language at home
    - Language in media (sports coverage)
    - Formal language
    - Language between friends
  - Argument Writing
    - Rap music
  - Connections to athletics
    - Establishing classroom norms
    - Mentor texts based on sports
    - Competitive play
- Relied on classroom community
  - Class Creed
Student groups and partnerships
- Brought race and cultural background into curriculum
  - Language connected to race and culture
  - Culturally-relevant texts
  - Challenging stereotypes

Figure 3.4: Large-scale Instructional Moves

This reorganization of codes allowed me to see the three large-scale instructional moves I made and how my smaller-scale teaching focuses fit within them.

Following this step, I coded the classroom observation data and my researcher’s journal notes to show students’ level of engagement in response to both levels of my instructional moves—large-scale and lesson-specific (See Appendix B). This analysis focused only on classroom observation data and transcripts and notes I took immediately following lessons and engagements. From this analysis, I gained an understanding of my role and the impact of my instructional moves, as well as how students responded through engagement or disengagement.

After analyzing classroom observation data and my research notes focused on the whole class, I analyzed the same data, as well as interview data and transcriptions, to focus more closely on my focal students’ responses and reflections. I analyzed the classroom observation data and transcriptions, as well as my research notes, to determine the focal students’ levels of engagement in response to my instructional decisions. I analyzed the interview data and transcriptions as well as notes in my researcher’s journal about the focal students’ insights and reflections on their relationship with me, relationships with classmates and their sense of belonging to the classroom community. I also coded this data to learn about their reflections on issues around race. From this analysis, I was able to make claims about how they responded to instruction and felt
about learning, as well as how they felt in our classroom community and how they viewed and responded to issues of race. From this analytic approach, I created substantive and possibly theoretical codes as a means of making “some sort of claim about the topic being studied” (Maxwell, 2005).

**Trustworthiness, Triangulation, and Member Checking**

I relied on various strategies to ensure the integrity of my study. I triangulated data by using multiple sources of data, including classroom observations, notes from my researcher’s journal, interviews with two focal students, and focal students’ learning artifacts (Merriam, 2002). I cross-referenced interview transcripts with what I captured on video recorded observations in order to create “a more complete and accurate account than either could” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 94) provide on their own. I also relied on the students’ artifacts of learning as a follow up in helping me understand the experiences of my students. Because I worked with the students on a daily basis in the classroom, I engaged in ongoing member checking (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2002) following Merriam’s advice that “participants should be able to recognize their experience in [my] interpretation” (p. 26). I shared all transcripts from interviews with the two focal students to ensure that I captured language reflective of the message they tried to convey about their experiences in middle school and their perceptions of themselves as members of our classroom and school. I also shared observation notes with the students to make sure that I accurately captured the experiences they seemed to be having in the classroom. Finally, as a part of regular classroom instruction and as a part of this study, I gave students regular feedback on the learning artifacts they created. As their teacher, this was necessary for their
continued growth, but as a researcher, I paid attention to how they responded to ensure that I truly understood their purpose and what they intended to convey in learning artifacts.

I asked colleagues, including fellow teachers who knew my focal students and school administrators, to read my analysis and interpretations to ensure that my claims were not far-fetched but instead were reflective of the collected data and the students’ perspectives. I also shared my analysis and interpretations with the focal students’ parents, who I grew to know well during their sixth grade year. I placed a great deal of importance on ensuring that I presented their children’s perceptions with accuracy and care since they allowed me the opportunity to learn from them.

My researcher’s journal provided a reflective tool that helped me consider the data I collected throughout the process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Through reflective writing during the research process, I watched for instances when my view of the data was skewed because of the various lenses that make up part of who I am as a researcher.

**Considerations**

One significant consideration was that the study participants, my class of students including the two focal students, were students in my ELA classroom, which could have initially impacted how honest the students were since I was their teacher. Marcus and Jared, in particular, could have felt hesitant because they wanted to get their responses “right” or because they wanted to say what they thought I wanted them to say. However, I do think the student-teacher relationship we had from the previous year helped to prevent this occurrence, though initially, they seemed a bit hesitant to answer interview questions. A second consideration was that I only had 11 students in my class. I consider
this worth noting because having only 11 participants might make my findings seem too narrow or subjective. However, the responses of the 11 plus the more detailed reflections from the focal students can potentially inform other teachers’ beliefs about the importance of valuing and relying on students’ cultural backgrounds in creating lessons and curriculum.

**Conclusion**

In conducting this qualitative case study, it was my aim to learn about the experiences of students in my middle level ELA classroom, focusing closely on two African American students’ experiences, when I implemented culturally relevant teaching practices. Specifically, I wanted to learn about their experiences when I relied on their personal interests, lives, and cultural knowledge in creating lessons and learning engagements. I took a qualitative approach because I wanted to delve deeply into the experiences of the two participants, Marcus and Jared, as they engaged in learning activities in my classroom. I collected data by conducting interviews, observations, and by collecting the participants’ learning artifacts. In addition to learning about students’ experiences, I also learned from my experience as a teacher trying to implement culturally relevant teaching strategies for the first time. The students’ experiences, as well as my own, have the potential to inform other educators who want to make similar shifts in their teaching.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

Introduction

To determine findings from my study, I analyzed the data I collected from video recordings of classroom observations, transcripts from interviews, and notes I took in my research journal. As a first step, I read across all of my data and identified information that seemed salient, e.g., stereotypes, evidence of student learning, awareness of race, discussion of race, curriculum that drew on students’ interests, and evidence of community. I then reread the data, keeping in mind my original research question: What happens when students’ interests, lives, and cultural resources are drawn upon and studied through ELA curriculum?

I originally organized the findings into three categories: 1) instructional decisions and actions, 2) whole class’ responses, and 3) the responses of my two focal students. I eventually collapsed the first two categories as they captured the lived curriculum and then focused on Jared and Marcus’ individual responses. There were subcategories within each pattern (see Appendix B). These patterns enabled me to describe, and consequently, tell the story of how I attempted to use guidelines of culturally relevant teaching in making my instructional decisions and student responses to those decisions. While I only collected data in the spring, the entire academic year was a cyclical process of gathering data, deciding and implementing instructional moves based on my understanding of culturally relevant teaching, and then, based on observations and
student data, re-envisioning those moves. Thus the curriculum was a lived process, not a prescribed one.

The Lived Curriculum

Before the year began, I made three large-scale curricular decisions—to build on students’ lives and interests, rely on the classroom community, and bring race and cultural background into the curriculum. I began this study after having taught the students the previous year. I knew my students well, so I was able to use what they were interested in as I planned lessons, chose texts, and created assignments and assessments. Across the year, for example, I relied on the students’ interest in athletics as I tried to create lessons that connected sports they either played or regularly viewed. Many of the students were friends inside and outside of the classroom. I built on the relationships I previously established with the students and students had established with each other. Within the first couple of months of the school year, the group became quite cohesive, and I often depended on the community within the classroom for motivation and support of learning. Within this context, I intentionally tried to bring race and cultural background into our class discussions and learning.

Responses to attempts to draw on students’ lives and interests: Engagement and disengagement. During the year, there were two clearly defined substantive units of study—one focused on language and another focused on argument writing. Within these and across the year, I consistently tried to draw on students’ lives and interests. I made decisions, observed student responses, reflected and reinvented curriculum, and paid attention to the degree to which students chose to engage or not in my attempts. Student engagement fell along a continuum from very high to opting out.
**Studying language’s impact on mood and tone.** In our study of language, we looked at language used at home or outside of school, language used as part of sports coverage, language used in more formal settings, and language used between friends. I recognized that within each of these explorations of language, students responded differently, ranging from choosing to not engage or complete assigned tasks to showing authentic engagement through lively discussion and reenactment of language we heard.

*Home language.* To help the students see the relevancy of this assignment in their lives, I asked them to study the language either they or their friends and family members used in their homes and neighborhoods. I wanted them to recognize that language creates mood and tone. I introduced this activity by first having students brainstorm what they thought they might find. I said:

Okay, here's what we're going to do. I'm going to give everyone a sticky note and on it you are going to answer a question, and we're going to put them up there on the window where I have the question posted. I want us to write an answer to the first question in blue right there, and it says, ‘What do we expect to find when we pay attention to our language?’ The language we use at home. What, like to give you some more to think about, what words do we think we might hear, what might we notice about how loudly or quietly we talk in different places, what do you think, what are you expecting to find about yourself or other people in conversations? So I want everyone to answer that question. What do we expect to notice or find when we pay attention to our language?

After a bit of time to complete this brainstorming, I reviewed with the class what they wrote on their sticky notes. I read from their written responses: “We expect to find curse
words that are loud, loud, bad words, talking crap. I don't know what that means. What does that mean?” The students explained they meant “junk talking” or “trash talking.” I continued reading:

    All right, different grammar, a lot of talking, a lot of cussing, saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. That's interesting. Um, another one that says loud, another one that says a lot of cussing, there will be cursing.

It was clear that the students thought their study of language in their personal lives (on the school bus, with friends, at home, etc.) would reveal language which would be vastly different from what we engaged in and experienced at school. I was careful to make sure students knew that I understood this might be what they found, and that it was acceptable for them to report on that language. To further demonstrate that this type of language was acceptable, I had students participate in a conversational game in which I did not facilitate or participate. I assigned roles of discussion leader, time keeper, and observer. The discussion leader was given a series of “Would you rather” questions that he asked to the group. While the group discussed their opinions, the observer tried to take notes of what he noticed about the conversation. Students participated in this activity for a total of eight minutes before stopping to share with the class what they noticed about the language they used. I led the group in a reflective discussion afterward. To begin this conversation, I said:

    Since I did not sit down with you and join in this conversation, you guys were probably more, um, you took more risks in saying things that you wouldn't have said. If I had been sitting at the table with you, would you have said some of the things you said?
Initially a student responded that he would have spoken the same way. Marcus replied to him, “Hey, what if your mom was here?” The student quickly responded that he would not have used some of the language he used. I followed up by saying to the group:

The goal for today was for you to think about how you talk differently depending on your audience. Today you were talking with your friends, and I was in the room. I imagine if I was out of the room, the talk would have gone even further. Okay, so I wanted us to do that before you go to record conversation [at home] because I am aware that things will be said, and I wanted you to know that that is okay.

It was important that students understood that I valued all the language they would collect from home, whether it was deemed school appropriate or not.

However, the students did not complete the task. For a week, I tried to get students to bring in the recordings, but each day they provided different excuses for why they had not. Several students repeatedly told me they forgot, others said peers or family members did not want to be recorded, and at least two simply said they were not going to do the assignment. Of the 11 students, three actually tried to complete a recording, but their recordings provided little insight into the language I was hoping they would uncover. For one student, a conversation on the bus was too muffled to hear because he was trying to record without others noticing. Two other students recorded television, episodes of ESPN’s Sports Center, which again did not offer much insight about language use at home. It seemed that students were either truly forgetting to complete the task, or perhaps, they did not feel comfortable recording talk about family members or
peers. Once I realized students were not going to complete this task, I decided to try to achieve the same goal by using clips from media as a point of entry.

*Sports coverage language.* I knew my students were interested in football; several of them played for the school’s team. Following the qualifying game between the Seattle Seahawks and the San Francisco 49ers, ESPN reporter Erin Andrews, who is a European American female, interviewed Richard Sherman of the Seahawks. During the interview, Sherman infamously began shouting into the camera, leaving Andrews perplexed as to how to continue the interview. This interview received major attention across social media and news broadcasts, and several comments were made about Sherman’s language and expression. Because I knew students in my class were closely following the games leading up to the Super Bowl and that most had watched this particular game, I decided to use the post-game interview with Sherman to have them consider how his language created a certain mood for the viewer and how he created a particular tone in his message. To introduce the clip and the purpose for our viewing it, I said, “How many of you heard about or saw what Richard Sherman said after the game?” Jared immediately stood up, and said, “Oh yeah, he said, ‘That's what you do when you put a weak wide receiver on there.’” Before showing the clip, I said:

So I want to show you that video of his post-game interview with Erin Andrews . . . for two reasons. One, I want you to think about the tone that he has. So, open up and look at your tone words (see Figure 4.1). The reason you have these words is because it's really easy to say a generic word, and you're going to use a descriptive word.
Examples of Tone Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sincere</th>
<th>Paranoid</th>
<th>Hurt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>Playful</td>
<td>Pleading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>Pleading</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Depressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecstatic</td>
<td>Proud</td>
<td>Disappointed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironic</td>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Aloof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affectionate</td>
<td>Suspicious</td>
<td>Apathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approving</td>
<td>Condescending</td>
<td>Light-hearted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>Aggravated</td>
<td>Objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scornful</td>
<td>Cynical</td>
<td>Somber</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.1: Teacher-provided Examples of Tone Words*

After we watched the interview, the following conversation took place:

Gillaspy: Okay, let's think about this for a second. First of all, does anybody know what Crabtree said? I don't.

Jared: He said something and started talking about him 'cause he pushed his helmet.

Devin: Y'all saw when he pushed his face mask? That's when he said something.

Jared: Yeah, yeah, he said something, and then Crabtree pushed him in his face mask.

Gillaspy: So there's like a pretty intense rivalry between them, right?

Students: Yeah.

Gillaspy: When you heard that, look at your tone words, what tone would you say he created, because the tone is controlled by the speaker or the writer, okay? So, what tone does Richard Sherman have right then?

Aaron: Serious.

Dylan: Critical.

Henry: Intense.
Jared: I was going to say serious.

After the discussion of tone, I told students we would watch it again, but for a focus on mood. After watching, the following conversation occurred:

Gillaspy: Mood is how you're supposed to feel. What do you think, this lady right here, Erin Andrews, what was she feeling?

Students: She was scared!

Gillaspy: Why was she scared, Henry?

Henry: Because he was yelling and stuff.

Jared: She was going to ask another question, but she didn't feel like getting yelled at, so she just didn't.

Gillaspy: So she just got out of the situation didn't she?

Jared: Intense, he was intense.

Gillaspy: Intense, I really like.

Formal language. I also used a video of Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1963) “I Have a Dream” speech to provide another text for students to analyze for tone and mood. I explained,

So here's your task. While you watch and listen, I want you with your pencil to underline or circle the words that seem to be doing that work of creating the tone or mood, the words that strike you as moving. (See Figure 4.2)
**Martin Luther King, Jr.—“I Have a Dream” Speech**

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, that one day right down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today. (repeated)

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where
my fathers died, land of the Pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that; let freedom ring from the Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Figure 4.2: Jared’s Underlined Words for Mood and Tone

Students were completely silent while viewing the video clip. In our discussion following our viewing of the clip, Jared responded:

For tone, I put serious because, um, on the video when he says something on his face, like former slave and son and at the table of brotherhood, I thought that was serious because when he was saying that in the video, he wasn't, um, he wasn't like playing around with that because back then he knew that we, that like black people, were slaves and stuff like that and they would treat the slaves wrong, like they'd whip them and stuff.

My response to Jared was, “Your explanation was fabulous because he references and alludes to something that is very serious in our history, right? The words you used were, ‘He wasn't playing around with that.’ You're right, he wasn't.”
Language between friends. Following this discussion about the tone and mood of two very different texts, I pulled a clip from *The Cosby Show* (Weinberger et al., 1986) that would show how people change their language, particularly their tone, depending on their audience. The clip I chose to use focused on two male characters, Theo and Cockroach, as they talked to a new girl at school. I knew students would be particularly interested in this because the girls they were talking with or interested in was a common topic of discussion in our classroom. Before viewing the clip, I just told students to pay attention to how the boys talked during the clip. After we watched, I asked the students what they noticed, and Jared immediately answered, “They was like uh, uh, uh [uses a deep voice] and when they got to that girl, they was talking all polite and stuff like that.” He continued, “Like they voice change and they mood change because after they talked to the girl, they acted like they were themself then. But when they got to the girl, they were like [changes facial expression to look serious].”

What Jared noticed was what I was hoping students would catch on to, so I asked them to watch the video again, and before beginning I said, “I want you to pay attention to what Jared just said. Watch how they talk to each other and then how it changes when they talk to the girl.” While watching, Jared said, “See, that's what I'm talking about! Their voices get all high and junk [when they talk to the girl].” Following the second viewing, Marcus mentioned that Devin had just recently been talking with a new girl at our school, who he joked became Devin’s girlfriend after only a couple of days at school. I had not intended for the television clip to have a personal connection with any of the students, but once Marcus mentioned Devin’s new girlfriend, all the students joined in the conversation, joking with Devin and asking if he had changed the way he talked to
our new student so that she would be his girlfriend. Devin seemed to enjoy this attention and joined in the banter back and forth between the students. This type of camaraderie among the students was typical, and suggests they were thinking about the lessons I was trying to teach about how we use language for different purposes.

**Argument writing.** While working independently on reading or writing tasks, students often listened to music on their personal devices or on their school-issued iPads. They also often discussed music they listened to with each other, and at times passed their headphones around for others to hear certain songs. I was very aware of this behavior, and I drew on that interest by having it as a focus when we studied argument writing. At the time of the study, my school district, like many others, were in a “bridge year” in which we combined previously held state standards and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). One significant piece of the CCSS document was the shift from persuasive writing as outlined in our state standards and argument writing as outlined in CCSS. The most significant difference between these types of writing is that, in argument writing, the writer strengthens her stance by focusing also on the counter claim or opposing side. This was a more complex approach than the previous persuasive approach in which the writer’s main task is to convince her reader of a certain belief or stance on an issue. Because of this change, I knew that the topic we focused on had to be one that students would fully buy into and truly care about. We began to consider various topics and for about five days considered various possibilities for arguments they really cared about. The original questions I asked students to consider were:

- What does it mean to be a man in America? What do you think makes someone a man and no longer a boy? Where do these beliefs come from?
• How are you like the people you admire as heroes? Do you value the same things? Do you have the same goals? Have you had similar struggles or successes?

• Do you become what you consume? Think about all that you consume through media. Do the various sources of media (television, music, movies, sports coverage, and video games) impact who you become?

Initially students struggled to answer these questions, but after sitting in several round-table discussions, I recognized that they seemed most interested in the third question. To be sure, I asked the students to brainstorm in small groups the various types of media they viewed or listened to most often. On a sheet of chart paper, I had students draw a four-square box and label a box for each of the following: Music, Video Games, Movies, Television. The first step in brainstorming would be for them to work in small groups to generate a list of the specific songs, games, movies, and television shows they watched in hopes of finding some patterns among their interests.

The small groups initially sat around tables, but as they talked, they began to stand, jump up and down, or high five each other when someone had a new idea. Two of the three groups stood around one person who sat writing their lists on a piece of chart paper. Those standing crowded behind the writer giving input. During this brainstorm, all students participated and the volume of their voices grew as they worked. They listed a number of television shows, movie titles, video games, and musical artists or songs (See Figure 4.3).
### What Media Do We Consume?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Games</th>
<th>TV/Movies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>NBA 2K14</em></td>
<td><em>Adventure Time</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Madden</em></td>
<td><em>SpongeBob</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Call of Duty</em></td>
<td><em>Sports</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Need for Speed</em></td>
<td><em>Family Guy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>NCAA Football</em></td>
<td><em>Friday</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kingdom Hearts</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lil Wayne—rap</td>
<td><em>Friends</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eminem</td>
<td><em>Football teammates</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dub step</td>
<td><em>Soccer teammates</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay Z</td>
<td><em>Basketball teammates</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papa Roach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Keef</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yayo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker Knockerz—Rico Story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.3: Students’ Brainstormed List**

They seemed to be intrigued about being able to share the things they most often encountered in media, and I reminded them often that topics we addressed in school were connected to their lives outside of school. By reminding them of their control of this topic, I hoped they would see that they were the guides in this study. For example, I said:

> I'm going to try to find some articles for you to read about these things and some videos for you to watch okay, like interviews and stuff, for you to think about what is it that you're consuming when you are listening to this music and watching these shows and movies and playing these video games. This is your stuff though, like I don't play these games and I don't listen to this music, so tomorrow we're going to need to branch out each box and tell me some descriptors about each one so I know what I’m really looking for. You are the experts here.
After further discussion during the next two class periods, and examining the lists they created in small groups, the students and I landed on two key components—rap music and video games—as areas of interest to think further about. We came to this conclusion after realizing that their lists of video games and music (both song titles and artists) were longer than television shows and movies.

In the days that followed, I searched online for information about adolescents and rap music, as well as adolescents and video games. I was not sure what I would find, but I quickly learned after very informal Internet searching that there seemed to be an argument that rap music and video games could potentially make children more violent as a result of language, images, and topics shown or discussed. Because I knew that these types of media made up a significant part of students out-of-school literacies, I was confident that they would take a stand on the topic. I introduced the topic by saying to the class:

A lot of reports and studies say that a lot of rap, hip hop, and video games that are violent and have violent lyrics make kids violent. A lot of reports say they don't. So, I'm thinking, I'm curious about what you think about that and want to give us an opportunity to learn about and think about that and give us an opportunity to write about that instead of it just being a general topic that I make up for you.

During this initial first day of discussion, I used a Know-Want to find out-Notice-Learn (KWNL) chart to help anchor our discussion. To understand what each student knew, I initially asked the students individually to record in the K column what they already knew. I then asked them to share some of what they already knew about rap music and
its impact on the behavior of adolescents who listened to it. It became clear this was an area of interest:

Jared: Tu Pac!
Dylan: All rappers rap about money, girls, and drugs.
Aaron: Nah ah, that's a lie.
Henry: That's a lie.
Marcus: Listen to Rich Homie Quan. He raps about his life.
Dylan: I'm just saying most do.
Marcus: Man, you need to stop listening to that old stuff.
Aaron: Like Eminem. He raps, well most rappers, talk about their life or other people's.
Dylan: He talks about drugs.
Aaron: No he doesn't.
Henry: Yes he does.
Devin: Man, you need to quit listening to them old songs. They talk about life.
Aaron: Exactly! Get updated.

The students were interested in the topic and had opinions about rap music; they cared enough to begin debating about it.

I knew also that many of the students liked Eminem’s music, so early in our discussions about the topic of the influences of rap music, I showed the class a segment about Eminem’s career from the CBS program 60 Minutes (Eminem, 2010). The segment showed Eminem’s response to listeners who believe his music and lyrics are too violent or aggressive. He also discussed the motivation behind his music and how much
he loved to explore language and words as a child which impacted his work. The purpose of this focus was to provide a multimedia text that students could use to begin collecting information and support for their argument that rap music either does or does not cause its listeners to become violent.

**Athletics.** Throughout the school year, students in the class were part of the football, basketball, baseball, and track teams. I knew that sports was a passion for many of the students because though they were only eligible to participate in school sports as seventh graders, they had been members of local club teams for many years, particularly basketball. I tried to draw on their interest and involvement on athletic teams whenever possible. I used the students’ interest in athletics: 1) in establishing classroom norms; 2) in using mentor texts for writing study; and 3) in regular competitive play that incorporated learning. Within each of these patterns, students’ responses showed engagement through participation in discussion or physical activity.

**Establishing norms.** I used the students’ connection to sports beginning early in the year; I had students develop our class norms and expectations (See Figure 4.4) by thinking about how we were a team, much like the football team many were a part of at the time.

**Class Norms and Expectations**
- Have one another’s back
- Help one another get better
- Don’t disrespect the game
- Respect each other
- Represent the team well
- Learn from mistakes

*Figure 4.4: Class Norms and Expectations*
In the classroom, the team we referred to were our classmates and the game was school, ELA in particular. This early connection to sports provided a foundation for the remainder of the year.

*Using mentor texts for writing study.* Students take the state standardized writing assessment in early spring, and in the two weeks prior to the test, we revisited the genre—a traditional five-paragraph essay—they would be expected to use on the test. We had not been writing in this style specifically, and I felt they needed a review of how to write to an on-demand prompt in a very organized way for the test. I knew that students would not be overly excited by this task, so I chose an essay about basketball (See Figure 4.5), a high interest topic, as a mentor text.
The sport of basketball is known as a fun past time for any person, young or old. Basketball is a great way to exercise and a great way to have fun with friends. I love to watch and play the game; basketball is a very entertaining sport and can be played by anyone. Three reasons basketball is such an entertaining past time are that basketball is a great way to spend time playing with friends, there are a variety of different positions to master, and it is the best sport to watch on television.

Basketball, in my opinion, is the best thing I can do with my friends to have fun while burning a few calories. I see basketball as an easy way to have fun with friends, rather than sitting on the couch all day playing video games or watching television. One reason I love basketball is because you need only yourself to play the game. I prefer to have others to play with because playing with friends is not only fun, but it is also more of a challenge. When you play basketball with your friends, you are able to play for hours without ever feeling bored.

Another thing I love about basketball is that there are so many different positions to play, so there is always something new to learn. There are skills to improve such as passing, assisting shots, shooting, defense, and even dunking the ball. There are also positions like point guard, shooting guard, and post. Whenever I am trying a new position, I try to listen to my coach and learn how to be my best in that new position. I also know that I can learn from my teammates who are more skilled than I am. Basketball allows me to grow and improve as an athlete and player.

Finally, basketball is the best sport to watch on television. Basketball is entertaining to watch on television because when you watch it, you are often amazed by the moves you see the professionals make. I try to take many of my moves from professional basketball players and make them my own because they expand my arsenal of tricks. There are a variety of tricks the players perform during games that makes the games much more enjoyable to watch. My favorite player to watch is Kobe Bryant. He is an all-around athlete and is still going strong at 30 years old. He is a big role model to many kids who enjoy playing this sport. Kobe can do anything; he is a very versatile player and could get anywhere around the court in a blink of an eye. I want to play like him as I continue to get better and better every time I practice. Kobe makes the game much more enjoyable to watch because of his acrobatic shots and stunning defense.

Basketball is a great past time for anyone and is a great way to spend time playing with friends. Playing basketball provides numerous opportunities to continue to improve by learning new skills and trying new positions. Watching basketball on television is very entertaining and paying attention to how professional athletes play the game continues to help me improve my game. Overall, basketball is a fantastic sport that provides lots of fun and entertainment.

**Figure 4.5: Marcus’ Mentor Essay with Notes**

During this study we looked at the main parts of the essay, recognizing overall structure—introduction with a thesis sentence, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. We talked about the structure of individual paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting
detail sentences. Most of the students found this work fairly easy. They understood the
genre and my use of a high interest topic provided them with a space to talk openly and
share their thinking about a topic they found interesting. For example, Marcus
commented one day:

    Mrs. Gillaspy, if you think about it, basketball is really weird. People be making
    the pros just for shooting a ball in a basket. Like, basketball is kind of weird
    because like five people try as hard as they can to get the ball in a basket, and they
    think of all kind of plays to do and crossovers and dunks just to put the ball in the
    basket.

Similarly, throughout the various lessons focused on the genre, multiple students
frequently made gestures in the air as if they were shooting a basketball. Several who sat
near the trashcan continually took turns shooting paper balls into the trashcan. I do not
think these examples prove that students learned what I intended them to learn, but I do
think they show my intentional choice to draw on an area of interest—basketball—to
help make a seemingly dry study of test-taking writing more appealing.

    Competitive play. Part of the students’ interest in sports is the competitive nature
of sports. I saw this often in their talk which often focused on what occurred at football or
basketball practice the previous afternoon—who completed more passes, ran more yards,
and scored more points. I drew on the students’ desire to compete. For example, to try to
liven up the study of sentence types, we played an impromptu game of darts. I instructed
students to write one simple sentence on a sheet of paper and then to crumple it up into a
ball. Once everyone was finished, I had them line up across the classroom, and together
they helped me create a bull’s eye for our game:
Gillaspy: Somebody tell me, if you were to hit the bull’s eye, how many points would that be?

Students: 10

Gillaspy: In the middle?

Students: 5

Gillaspy: And the outside?

Students: 1

During this time, students were extremely talkative, did a lot of joking around, and made a number of practice throws. Without being asked to, Jared went up to the board and wrote the points into the target I drew. He remained there and kept score during the game. After each student had a turn, I told the students:

Go find a paper ball and go back to your seat. Open it up. I need you to now look at that sentence, and we are going to add to the sentence and make it a compound sentence. Now you have to pick one of the coordinating conjunctions we learned and add another sentence to make it compound.

Following this revision, the boys played round two of the game. I used this type of game often because I knew that the students would become more engaged if there was an element of competition. Students responded positively by following the expectations of the game—taking turns, updating scores, following the rules of where to stand—and they also did the work of revising sentences for the different rounds of the game.

Similarly, students often found it hard to become very engaged with word study, particularly the study of affixes and Greek and Latin roots, topics in the state standards I was required to cover. The game *Tips* was something players on the basketball team
played to warm up before practice or games. Players circle up and simply pass the ball across the circle, but the key is that the ball only touches the tips of their fingers and players jump up as they pass the ball to others. The speed of this game became an important part of our review of word parts we were practicing because in order to play the game well, students had to know the material. For example, one student would pass the ball first and shout a prefix such as bio-, the next student would shout the meaning of the prefix as he passed to another player, and the third would shout a word with bio- in it, such as biology or biological. Students played Tips throughout the year, and often asked to play for review before taking assessments. Most significantly, during Tips all students in the class were actively involved; no students opted out of the game any time they played. During the games, students would occasionally argue about how to play or what to say, but the banter back and forth between students never interfered with them wanting to play or their eventual ability to come together and play the game for long enough to get worthwhile practice with the word parts they were learning. This type of work with words was minimal in the overall curriculum, but it was a structure I used often to allow the students movement, competition, and a connection to the game they all loved.

Classroom community. Like most teachers, I believe that in order to make progress with any group of learners, I have to first help them build community within the classroom. Different from some groups of learners I have worked with, this group of students came into my class with a great deal of community already built and strong relationships and friendships that had begun outside of the classroom. I knew that these relationships with one another were important to these students, so I decided early on that I would draw on those relationships to help establish the culture of our classroom and to
help support them each as learners. I very explicitly depended on the classroom community three times. First, the students created a class creed, which they stated at the beginning of class each day and eventually memorized. Secondly, I relied on the community in the classroom for supporting students in their learning. I used the different dynamics between students to help me make grouping arrangements for instructional purposes so that students would be best supported during small group instruction or partner work. Finally, I relied on non-academic activities which gave students a regular time to engage in play and physical movement, ultimately strengthening our community.

Class creed. I wanted us to have a class creed that we used at the start of our time together each day that would remind students of their expectations for themselves and each other. I talked to the students early in the year about the possibility of us having a class creed that we depended on for this type of reminder or guidance. It was similar to the class expectations we had, but it would be something that we repeated daily at the start of class. I thought that because this group of students had bonds outside of the classroom, I could use a class creed to bring that same sense of togetherness or team mentality into the classroom.

To develop our class creed, we referred to several mentor texts. I found a number of creeds, mission, and vision statements from other schools, mainly all-boys schools. I gave these various texts to students and asked them to highlight the parts they felt were important for us to include in our creed. After students worked on this, I pulled all of the text that they highlighted together for them to work with. As a whole group, the students worked to move lines around so that it flowed in an order they felt was logical. They also decided to begin each sentence with “We” and eventually decided to begin and end the
entire creed with “We are Roundtree Knights.” Initially, I asked students to read this aloud together at the start of class, but I quickly realized that it did not have the motivating feeling I was hoping for, and several students just did not participate at all. After we discussed that and students agreed, I changed the text so that it would be a call and response (See Figure 4.6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Creed</th>
<th>Revised Creed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We are Roundtree Knights.</td>
<td>Leader: We are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We support one another as brothers.</td>
<td>ALL: Roundtree Knights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We will become men of courtesy, integrity, and honesty.</td>
<td>Leader: We support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We will exhibit self-control and responsibility.</td>
<td>ALL: One another as brothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are intelligent.</td>
<td>Leader: We will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are leaders among our peers.</td>
<td>ALL: Become men of courtesy, integrity, and honesty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are in control of our futures.</td>
<td>Leader: We will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our decisions today affect us tomorrow.</td>
<td>ALL: Exhibit self-control and responsibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything is possible when we set our minds to it.</td>
<td>Leader: We are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education is our ticket to success.</td>
<td>ALL: Intelligent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are Roundtree Knights.</td>
<td>Leader: We are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ALL: Leaders among our peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader: We are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ALL: In control of our futures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader: Our decisions today</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ALL: Affect us tomorrow.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader: Anything is possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ALL: When we set our minds to it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader: Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ALL: Is our ticket to success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader: We are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ALL: Roundtree Knights.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.6: Original and Revised Class Creed**

This simple revision changed everything and made the creed the students had agreed on much more powerful. With this new version, Devin became the leader, and he called out to the rest of the class for their responses. Throughout the year, this creed changed from being something that I projected on the screen at the front of the room for them to read, to something that they had memorized and could say without the text in front of them.
use of this creed to help establish and build on the community these students brought with them to the classroom helped provide a sense of purpose for our time together each day.

**Support for learning.** I grouped students for direct, targeted small group instruction. The topics of these small groups included analyzing text for figurative language, determining a topic of study for our argument essay writing, organizing an argument essay, revising drafts of writing, brainstorming ideas for writing topics, analyzing poetry to determine theme, studying and reviewing for upcoming assessments, and revising writing. The use of small groups in classrooms is a common practice, and I tried to be purposeful in assigning students to groups I knew would be supportive. My efforts to group students for the best support did not always succeed, such as the time when I was at the table sitting between two students. I was giving a small-group lesson on how to structure an argument essay when they began *skeeting*, which is a particular way to spit through the teeth, at one another over my head and behind my back. In this case, the students were much more involved in playing with one another in a way that seemed perfectly acceptable to them, though I was caught in the fray. At times, however, the groups were more successful, such as a small-group lesson on how to analyze figurative language in a piece of poetry when Jared naturally began to lead the other students in describing what similes and metaphors in the text really meant. Prior to his emergence as the leader, I was not having much success in helping students think beyond just the identification of figurative language. Because Jared was leading the conversation, however, they more willingly participated.
I also thought about student bonds when placing them in partnerships. One key example was between the two focal participants, Marcus and Jared. The students were in the drafting stages of writing their argumentative essays about whether or not rap music could cause adolescent listeners to become violent. Students spent a good bit of time collecting evidence to support their arguments and had begun organizing their evidence to support their various claims. Marcus had struggled with organizing his evidence, and because Jared had already completed the task, I asked him to help Marcus with this step in the process. While Jared and Marcus worked, the following conversation occurred:

Marcus: I should've done video games.
Jared: Nah, nah, you should've did rap. You've got educational value, and did you say cultural value and that it created entertainment industry? Write, right here, cultural value (showing him where to write). And then educational, you already got that one. So write entertainment, it created entertainment industry.

I considered this a successful pairing. Marcus doubted his decision to focus on rap music, saying he should have instead focused on video games. Jared quickly reassured him that he made a good choice and talked him through the first step of getting his supporting reasons organized.

**Non-academic activity.** Throughout the school year, prior to and during the study, I tried often to help support the overall classroom community by helping students engage in both academic and non-academic activities. I knew that this group of students was motivated by competition and sports or activity. I, therefore, often planned for movement and activity in the classroom. We often went to the gym to play basketball or outside to the football field or blacktop to throw the football or play basketball. At other times, the
students and I took walks through the school building. At times, this movement had to do with learning tasks, but our classroom community was often reinforced and strengthened because I provided the students time to simply play together. For example, one student, Samuel, was not as naturally gifted as an athlete as some of the other students. Upon entering the gym on one occasion, six students immediately fell into a game of basketball, and Samuel just stood on the sideline watching. Marcus called him over and passed him the ball. Samuel clearly did not have the ability that the others did, but because Marcus brought him into the game, which I do not believe would have happened in a regular social setting, Samuel joined the game.

**Brought race and cultural background into curriculum.** I often tried to incorporate into our discussions the topic of our cultural backgrounds. I tried to do this intentionally during the unit on language by focusing on a highly racialized interview of a professional football player. I also tried to incorporate a connection to our different races by having students read texts that drew on this topic. Finally, I tried to help students challenge stereotypes that we discussed in both the study of language and when we read relevant texts. Specifically, I had students complete a project in which they challenged a myth they felt others unjustly held about them often because of stereotypical thinking. Throughout these different attempts to bring race and culture into our regular curriculum, students varied in their level of engagement. At times, they did not respond much or did not seem interested in the issues surrounding race, while at other times, they were eager to join in discussion.

**Language.** When I asked students to focus and record the language in their homes, I was trying to help them realize the value in their home language. In particular,
though, I was hoping they would also recognize the differences in language based on our various cultural backgrounds. I wanted them to also question the reaction of others in response to linguistic differences. Though this was my intention, on my first attempt to get them to question this, students did not pick up on what I was trying to make them recognize.

However, following our conversation about the mood and tone conveyed by Richard Sherman’s post-game interview, I asked the students, “Did you guys hear about how people reacted to that, to that interview?” Most had not heard of the very intense backlash toward Sherman that followed this interview. Much of that response had strong undercurrents of racial stereotyping and prejudice. For example, he was referred to as a *thug* and some claimed that he had shamed the game of football. I was curious about whether or not students would pick up on the underlying messages embedded in the general reaction to the interview. After explaining the reaction that occurred on social media, I asked the students, “When y'all watch Richard Sherman, when you watch Richard Sherman on that video, do you feel offended or nervous? Do you feel like he said anything wrong?” The students immediately shouted in unison, “No!” In the conversation that followed, I tried to gauge their thinking about why some might have felt that Sherman should not have made the comments he made.

Gillaspy: Okay, so maybe they felt offended or nervous because they are fans of Crabtree. What else could, why did she [Andrews] seem to feel nervous?

Jared: Because he was yelling on national TV and usually around Erin Andrews, she don't get people like that; like they're usually calm, but since that was the Super Bowl, he was excited.
Gillaspy: He was totally hyped, right?

Jared: Yeah, he was hyped because I don't think he ever been to the Super Bowl.

Jared’s initial reaction was very much focused on Sherman’s language and actions, but he did not mention the possibility that people thought he was acting or speaking in a stereotypical way. As the class discussion continued, other students mentioned that maybe fans were disappointed in him, that he was not respecting the game of football, or that he was just excited. Students also discussed that when people are famous, they have to be very careful of everything they say. Though all of the points they made were true, they did not pick up on any of the racial tensions that accompanied the public’s reaction.

Because the students did not recognize the racial tension on their own, I decided to ask them the question I wondered most about; I wanted them to fully consider how people often wrongly respond to others based on linguistic differences. I asked them:

So listen, I need to ask you a serious question. So we've been talking about this language thing, right? Okay, do you think that the language we use with our peers, with each other, do you think it's different depending on your cultural background or race?

In response the students shouted in unison, “Yeah!” But then one student, Henry, asked, “What do you mean by race?” When I answered, “Our race. Like, I'm white, you're black,” he said, “Oh yeah, white people, they talk all proper sometimes.” Another student, Caleb, who was European American, responded, “Hey!” and all the students started to laugh. At this point in the study, I was still quite nervous about this type of talk about race because I worried students would start to speak and say things like the example above that could be hurtful. In this case, we were having this conversation
minutes before the end of the period, so the conversation devolved quickly because students were dismissed to their next classes. Fortunately, this gave me time to think about how to set up future conversations about race, particularly how to use texts as an initial lens through which to consider race and the impact of race in our lives.

**Texts.** After we discussed the impact of language and tone and mood using video clips, I asked them to examine that impact in a written text. To help them maintain a connection between students’ culture, I used the text, “Refugee in America” by Langston Hughes (1990). Students had heard this poem performed by a group of actors from the local university, so I knew they had some previous experience with the text. I began this portion of the lesson by saying, “Because this is ELA, we have to actually take this idea and connect it back to text.” I gave everyone a copy of the text and asked them to read the poem and consider how they would describe the tone and mood. As we had previously done with transcripts from the videos we watched, I read the poem aloud for students, and they marked the words and phrases that they thought created a certain tone or mood (See Figure 4.7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refugee in America</th>
<th>Topic: Freedom in America</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>by Langston Hughes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are words like Freedom</td>
<td>Social Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet and wonderful to say.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On my heart-strings freedom sings</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All day everyday.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are words like Liberty</td>
<td>Emotional Mournful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That almost make me cry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had known what I knew</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You would know why.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.7: Jared’s Poem with Notes*
Similarly, I used texts to introduce ideas that pushed students to think about social issues focused on race. For example, we read the poem, “We Wear the Mask” (Dunbar, 1913). I chose Dunbar’s poem because I wanted my students to consider myths in general, but I wanted them to consider myths fueled by race in particular. I explained to students that Dunbar “was challenging big ideas that were happening at the time. And for him to be speaking out, what is said about him is that he was the first major African American poet in American and that he paved the way for the Harlem Renaissance.” I hoped that this idea would introduce the idea of using writing to challenge beliefs. I asked the students to look at a couple of lines in particular in thinking about their project:

Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask. (ll. 8-9)

I used these lines to guide students to consider the various masks we wear. Initially, we discussed this in fairly general terms, and Max connected the idea of the mask back to previous lessons about how we adjust our language according to different audiences. We discussed not sharing our true feelings or thoughts with everyone. After this type of discussion, though, we moved to talk about the actual mask that Dunbar was referring to, which had to do with racial tensions at the time he wrote the poem. This excerpt illustrates the type of conversation students had:

Caleb: So he can resemble a white man and not like his original face.
Gillaspy: Not who he really is/
Caleb: Yeah.
Gillaspy: And not stand out? Now, do you think based on this poem that he thinks wearing a mask is a good thing or a bad thing?
Dylan: Bad thing.

Gillaspy: Why?

Dylan: Like most people, like white people don't have to wear it.

Gillaspy: Like at this time, especially. But he would've had to, and he couldn't be his true/

Jared: Self

Gillaspy: Because he would've been mistreated, he would've not been taken seriously, like he wouldn't have been accepted.

This excerpt suggests that students were able to understand the racial injustice that would lead a person to wear a metaphorical mask, hiding his or her true self from others.

I also wanted to expose the students to more complex texts. Because many of them were reluctant readers, the texts they often read for independent reading did not incorporate the themes and issues I wanted them to consider. I decided that I could expose them to small sections of complex texts. This allowed us to use texts to have more meaningful discussions. I chose excerpts from: *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952), “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” (Dickinson, 1999), *We Beat the Streets* (Sampson, Jenkins, & Hunt, 2005), and *Monster* (Myers, 1999). As before, I read the text excerpts aloud while students annotated the text:

Gillaspy: Just like you did yesterday, I want you to underline or highlight those lines. Do something by those two lines. "The truth must dazzle gradually or every man be blind" (ll. 7-8). What does that mean?

Max: Everyone needs to be honest and constant.
Gillaspy: If the truth must dazzle gradually, does that mean you tell the truth, like immediately?

Dylan: You let it go like gradually. Let it go! [sings] You like tell them gradually, like give them clues kind of.

Gillaspy: Okay, because if you were to tell the whole truth, what would happen to people?

Dylan: They would know who you really are.

**Challenging stereotypes.** Near the end of the school year, I felt that students were finally ready to confront some of the issues surrounding racial stereotypes. I decided to have them confront myths about themselves using a project from Tatum’s (2013) text that has students consider myths that people wrongly believe about them, often based on their race. I thought this project would be an effective culminating assignment that would bring together much of the thinking I had tried to push them into throughout the school year. In one of our early discussions about the project, I had students think about the various myths they think people held about them. The conversation we had showed me much more of their thinking about the impact of racial stereotypes they experienced regularly. I initially led students to consider all of the areas that might cause people to believe certain things about them. I explained to the students,

I want us, together, to come up with some of the myths people might believe about us so that you have something to pull from? So let’s think together for a minutes. What are some of the things people might think about us based on our gender, our cultural background, our families, our performance in school?
To begin, I had them remember their first reaction to being in a single-gender class for ELA. On the first day of school, the students had numerous questions about why they were there. I said,

If you remember on the first day of school, when you found out you were in this class, can you tell me some ideas? A lot of you had some assumptions about why you were in this class that weren't true.

Immediately, students responded:

Aaron: Me!

Jared: Oh, He's got one! Remember, he said, why you put all the bad kids in one class?

Aaron: Yeah, I thought you put all of us because we're all bad.

Gillaspy: Okay, so is that a myth?

Jared: Yeah.

Gillaspy: Do you think people think you are just going to be a behavior problem?

Students: Yes.

Gillaspy: Is that true?

Students: No.

This discussion helped them first think about the idea of myths and how people often believe untrue, and often hurtful, things about them. The following excerpt from our discussion showed the other ideas students brainstormed:

Gillaspy: All right, what are other myths people might believe about us?

Henry: That we are not as smart and stuff.

Aaron: That the only thing we do is play.
Henry: That's what everybody say.

Devin: Everybody like, that's not fair!

Aaron: Y'all never do work; y'all just play!

Gillaspy: Is that true?

Students: No!

Jared: We play sometimes, but not all the time.

Gillaspy: Right. Okay, what else? Maybe not just in this class, but in your lives?

What do people believe about you?

Aaron: They think that just by looking at you, that you're not good at a certain sport.

Gillaspy: Why?

Aaron: Just how certain people look, they don't look all sporty and stuff.

Gillaspy: Okay, so could you say the opposite too, they assume that some of you, all you can do is play sports?

Aaron: Yeah.

Gillaspy: Did y'all hear what I just said? People assume that you're only good at sports? Some of you?

Devin: Yeah, that's what everybody think. They think I'm stupid.

Jared: People say, well this isn't everybody, this boy, he said I don't have money.

Max: Did he say he got more money than you?

Jared: [Nods yes].
Aaron: Mrs. Gillaspy, people sometimes look at other people's clothes and just think they're poor. Like if we don't wear Polo, oh man, you wearing that, oh man you ain't popular, you should wear Polo.

After this initial period of brainstorming ideas, Jared brought the group to the topic of cultural background:

Jared: People think like that Caucasian, white girls, they think since we're not white, they can't talk to us.

Gillaspy: Okay, do some people think that?

Students: Yeah.

Gillaspy: Okay, how do I put that up here? What is it that they're assuming if they think they can't talk to you?

Max: That maybe you could hurt them or something.

Gillaspy: Okay, so is that true?

Jared: I don't know.

Gillaspy: No, it's not true! You need to own that! Did you hear what he just said?

Jared: You know how, uh, white girls can hang out with a white dude, but they can't hang out with a black dude?

Gillaspy: Yeah, so what are they assuming about the black dudes?

Jared: I don't know.

Aaron: They assume that because we're black, they can't talk to us.

Jared: Yeah, but that ain't no reason to talk to some people and not others.

Gillaspy: I agree with you. That's what we're talking about.
Jared: Why do they hang around white people and every time black people comes over, they try to end the conversation?

Dylan: Mrs. Gillaspy, Mrs. Gillaspy! Can I tell you something really fast? People think that black people are better than white people at sports.

Aaron: They think that just ‘cause we black, we can fight. Not every black person can fight.

Devin: This [holds up iPad] is what people think. It [picture on his iPad] says, *Why are the best basketball players black? Because it involves running, shooting, and stealing.*

Henry: That's racist.

Gillaspy: That's a good example of a myth that is untrue and unjust. What I put right here about different races and different abilities. Are these abilities always good? Like, what you're talking about right there, if people assume that a certain group of people only steal, shoot, and run, is that good?

Devin: No.

Gillaspy: Is it true?

Devin: No.

Gillaspy: Is it okay for people to think that or say that?

Devin: No, definitely not.

After a bit more discussion, I concluded the conversation by saying:

And my whole point about this is that there are myths about you that aren't true. And so what I want you to do is explain why they aren't. This is so important for you as you grow up because you are all facing—based on who you are—facing
different challenges in life that are often myths. You are all going to face these assumptions that people make about you, and it's either going to help you in life or it could get in the way in your life. And right now, this project is for you to think about what are the myths that people believe about me, and how can I make sure that they're not true, that I know they're not true, and share that they're not true.

Jared and Marcus’ Responses to Lived Curriculum

The two study participants, Jared and Marcus, had fairly different responses to the lived curriculum. Jared participated in all activities, engagements, and lessons with enthusiasm, often sharing his thoughts. During interviews, Jared was open in reflecting on both his experience in the class and his experiences as an African American student in our school. Marcus’ response was quite different because he often chose not to participate in activities, engagements, and lessons. He made his choice to not participate obvious by putting his head down or asking to leave the classroom to use the restroom or get water. Though Marcus’ response in the classroom was often less dynamic than Jared’s, he did seem to recognize the importance of issues around race that we discussed.

Jared’s response. Jared often demonstrated his engagement in the classroom by responding to questions in whole-group discussion, starting and completing individual or partner tasks quickly, asking clarifying questions, and helping other classmates. He also showed engagement by often jumping up to answer questions, going to the front of the classroom to point at things on the board, or just standing at his table while he worked. Specifically, Jared’s response to my use of culturally sensitive instruction included six clear patterns—Jared 1) demonstrated understanding and excitement about his learning;
2) seemed to believe that I cared about him; 3) seemed to believe I created curriculum based on his interests; 4) seemed to feel that he belonged in our classroom community; 5) explored his understanding of race; and 6) considered how the world perceives him and how he wanted to respond.

**Demonstrated understanding and excitement about learning.** During class observations and interviews, Jared demonstrated regularly that he was engaged in his learning. Often during class activities, Jared physically showed engagement by moving around, getting up to demonstrate something or show he was excited about what we were doing. For example, when we played a game to practice sentence composing, he jumped up and ran to the board to begin writing scores down for the game. Also, if a text was projected on the board, such as during our reading and analysis of Martin Luther King’s (1963) “I Have a Dream,” he went to the board to point at the lines of the text he was referring to as he answered discussion questions. Similarly, when we were looking at the mentor text for our study of writing to a prompt, he immediately raised his hand, and said, “Oh, I got the thesis!” and waved his hand around, standing as he waited on me to respond. After I called on him, he said, “Can I go underline it?” and before I could answer, he quickly ran to the board to underline the correct sentence as the thesis of the essay. Another example of Jared’s movement was when we were analyzing song lyrics, and he was explaining the line, “I’m the beat in your heart” from a popular song (McDonald & Baker, 2001). He said, “She's not actually the beat in your heart. Like somebody else is your heart. So it’s a metaphor.” While explaining this, he stood by his chair and turned around to talk to his classmates. This type of movement around the
classroom occurred regularly and did not seem to distract from Jared’s learning. Rather, it suggested that he was engaged and actively participating in the task or activity.

In other instances, Jared demonstrated the same type of understanding by offering thorough explanations of texts we were reading. For example, after working with a group of students, including Marcus, to analyze “A Boy’s Life” by Nat Herz (as cited in Atwell, 2006) to determine tone, mood, and theme (See Figure 4.8), Jared volunteered to speak on behalf of his group to the class.
Figure 4.8: Students’ Notes on Mood, Tone, and Theme

With no prompting from me, he gave the following explanation of tone and mood:

His tone was sincere, and I said that because one day he will encounter the real world. Um, he was being serious. And then, the mood, I actually have two, is thoughtful and emotional. And the reason I said that was because of the part that says “a boy who can bench one-fifty without effort but . . . it will never be me” (ll. 2-5). I think that, I think that means that, um, like the boy can't bench 150 without effort, he has to think about it, but the boy who's the captain of the football team, he can just do it, he don't have no emotion into it or he don't think about it.

This type of lengthy response about a text suggested that he understood the text and was able to analyze it effectively.

In another instance, Jared engaged in a class discussion about Dunbar’s (1913) “We Wear the Mask” that suggested to me he was trying to both understand the text and the social influences that influenced Dunbar’s writing. After we first read the poem, I said,

The last two lines there, ‘let them only see us while we wear the mask.’ Okay, so I told you that he was an African American at the turn of the century right after the Civil War. What could he be talking about there? He's not talking about a literal mask, is he?

Another student, Caleb, quickly said, “How they got beat.” Before I could respond, Jared, interrupted to say,
They don't look at him, like if he was African American, he was like ‘Let them only see us while we wear the mask,’ that could be like no matter what, um, if this person was different from this person, they wouldn't treat him the same.

Gillaspy: Okay, how do you think at that time, if we know he was an African American man right after the Civil War, what kind of mask would he have to wear in public, in society? What kind of metaphorical mask?

Jared: White.

Later in the discussion, as we continued to discuss the mask the speaker wore, Jared asked, “Did he paint himself white?” I explained that the mask was metaphorical and added, “To write this poem and publish it, he was really speaking out about society and as a black man to speak out about that and speak against the white majority that was pretty risky at that time.” Jared immediately responded by asking, “Did they pay attention?” Jared’s engagement in this discussion of text, his questions to truly understand the text, and his interest in the response the poem got at the time, suggested to me that he was engaged and that he understood the message of the poem. A bit later, he made a more personal connection and added, “When I'm home, I take off my actual mask. Yeah, like when I'm hanging around my friends, I put my mask on, but at home I take it off.”

Seemed to believe I cared about him. During interviews, Jared reported that he valued a teacher who cared about him. Describing a good teacher, he said, “A teacher that's, a teacher that always has a smile on they face and is always, uh, like, don't mind if one of her students come in at lunch or in the morning, and don't mind helping them out.”
In response, I asked him, “So do you think if the teacher actually shows you that they care about your learning, that it makes a difference?” He answered,

    Yeah, ‘cause then the teacher and the student has like a connection with the teacher, and then the teacher will know, um, like how you would help this person out like if they don't understand it this way, you can do it this way, for that certain person.

Jared’s explanation about the importance of teacher interest and care revealed that he valued the student-teacher relationship. This comment provided a foundation for other interview comments he made. He said,

    I like you and being in a class with my friends. You let us sit on the big rolling balls and move around so we can be more focused. You know if we don’t move, we won’t be able to concentrate and get our work done.

He also said about his class performance,

    I want to do better because you talked to me and told me I’m ahead. I get to help other people in the class. When I do a good job in language arts, then I get to help my friends do a good job too.

*Seemed to believe I created curriculum based on his interests.* Jared also expressed his belief that I worked to draw on his and other students’ interests as I planned curriculum for his class. After a conference with Jared, one of our school’s deans shared with me that Jared told her that he enjoys our class because as his teacher I know him well and try to use their interests and what they enjoy as part of the lessons and engagements. She also said that Jared referred to our frequent connection to athletics in lessons, as well as the opportunity he had to ask questions about race.
Later in another interview, I asked him what he thought about our study and the focus on the impact of rap music. He said, “I think we get to express like what we know about rap [music].” He continued, saying that he liked the task, saying he liked it because, “I get to say, I get to write out, even though I don't like writing, I get to write out like what I think inside, yeah, like put it out.” He was referring to his opinion that rap music did not have a negative impact on listeners. I also asked him if he thought the fact that he was interested in the content helped with his work, and he responded, “Um, well for me, it's easy for me because I know like, I know about rap. Like that time we was talking about Abby Sunderland and like I don't know about sailing.” Abby Sunderland was a young girl who made a solo trip on her sailboat and ended up having to be rescued. We read articles about her experience prior to the focus on rap music. Jared’s reaction to the two different experiences showed that he was aware of how different the experiences were based on his interests. When I told him that I did not know anything about sailing either, he said, “But after that, when we was watching the Eminem thing and after that, we started talking about Tu Pac and Biggie Smalls and all that, I know about them, so yeah, I know about that.”

Seemed to feel like he belonged in the classroom community. I often depended on the classroom community that the students and I created, and Jared shared often that he also recognized and felt that the community was an integral part of his experience in the class. He initially explain,

It's like you put all of us in a, all of us are friends and stuff like that, and then you put us in that group, and then I guess we, when we in there, we figure out stuff,
how to work stuff out, since we know each other, we know how to figure stuff out.

He explained that he felt a level of comfort in the classroom that he did not always experience in his other classes. He mentioned the camaraderie between the students when he said, “Like you can laugh and talk with them 'cause you know them. Like most people, you don't really know them, so you don't laugh with them.” In another instance, he explained similarly that in our class he was comfortable because he was surrounded by close friends. He said,

In this class we got all boys, like we got all our homies and stuff in here. And then, we get to talk, we get to talk, well, not however we want, but we're more comfortable talking in this class because you know us, yeah, like we real close to you and stuff like that, so yeah.

In this statement, he not only mentioned that he was close to the other students, but to me as well. He recognized this closeness between all of us as a factor in making him feel like he was a part of the group.

The closeness that Jared felt with his peers not only impacted his general sense of belonging in the class. He also reported that because he was close with his classmates, completing classwork or projects together was easier. He referred to a project he completed the previous spring with another student, Paul, who was not in the class and that he was not close friends with. He compared that experiences with his work with another student, Devin, in our class. He explained that he and Devin have similar perspectives, which made it easier to complete a task together. He said,

Like, me and Devin working on the myth thing. And then Paul, he in French
immersion. So we in science doing our project thing, our animal thing from Congaree swamp, and then, like, he had a different, he had a different, uh, point of view of things. Like, he said we should do this, and I thought we should do this other thing. But when I worked with Devin it was like the same.

To clarify, I asked, “So is it easier for you then, it's been easier to accomplish tasks like in our groups because, because like you guys think the same or have similar experiences?”

He admitted that sometimes working with such close friends led to off-task behaviors as they worked, but that the student he worked with the previous year never got off task. He shared,

But like Devin and me, we can just play. I guess that's what I really mean, you have to act a different way around this person. But then you can, but Devin, ‘cause I know him better, I can act how I want to.

Again, one of our school’s deans communicated that Jared shared with her that he valued the relationships he had with other students in the class. She explained that he described the class by focusing on the group dynamic, referring to classmates as his brothers. He expressed that the history he had with some of the students seemed to help his class performance. In a subsequent interview with me, Jared specifically referred to the level of comfort as a necessity in discussion of some of the more challenging topics around race:

Gillaspy: So, have you ever had an opportunity in any of your other classes to, like, talk that openly about culture and race and stuff like that? Has this ever been something that you get to explore the way that we have?

Jared: Well, not in the past, but this year, yeah.
Gillaspy: Yeah, there have been other classes?

Jared: No, just this class.

Gillaspy: What about in the past? Have you had other classes where you got to be as open about cultural differences?

Jared: No, 'cause I haven't had a friend, well, I haven't had friends that's that close because they haven't gone to school with me.

Gillaspy: So, probably part of the, like, the community that you were talking about, do you feel like if you weren't with that group, you would be able to talk about it so easily? Like, think about in some of your other classes. Like, you know in our school there are fewer African American students than white students. So, when you guys are spread out in all of your classes, there aren't as many of you guys in that friend group as are in our class.

Jared: Yeah.

Gillaspy: So, is it easier to talk about those things when you're with that group?

Jared: Yes, ma'am.

Gillaspy: Like, you feel

Jared: comfortable.

Gillaspy: Comfortable or supported, like no one is going to misunderstand what you're trying to say?

Jared: Yes, ma’am.

Gillaspy: Because you've come a long way. Like at the beginning of the year, before you would say something about race, you would say, I don't want to be racist or I don't mean any disrespect, but . . .and then say, but now you just say it
because like I guess you've realized it's okay. I don't know if you've realized that about yourself.
Jared: No, I haven't realized that.

**Explored his understanding of race (differences, stereotypes, language).** Jared was willing to openly discuss his perspective on race, though he occasionally also revealed some of the stereotypes he held about other students. For example, in describing white students, he said, “Like how they talk, like um, they'll be like, ‘What's up, dude?’ [high intonation, mimicking others' voices] Like, African American people don't do that, they'll be like, ‘Uh yea, what's up man?’ [deeper voice].” I asked him if the difference he recognized about language impacted his communication with those students. In particular, I wondered if he felt it was more difficult to talk with them. He said, “No, I mean, they just like us, but like, where they come from and they speech, that's different 'cause they hang around different uh, they come from different cultures than us.” Jared’s explanation suggests that he did recognize linguistic diversity and realized that much of this difference is based on the difference in students’ backgrounds.

In several instances, Jared mentioned different experiences in working with students of another race. In particular, he mentioned having to alter how he acted or spoke when with those students. I wondered more about this, so I asked him to explain further:

So twice now you've said something about, um, when you're with other people, like you mentioned Paul, and then you mentioned this kid in elementary school. You said that you have to think about how you talk and how you behave I guess? Do you think about that all the time when you're not with your friends, like Devin
and Marcus, and our crowd? Like when you're in other classes, do you feel like you have to think about that all the time?

He responded that in other classes he did consider that, but not in our class. I asked him to explain what he thought about, and he said that he thought about his voice. He said, “I don't know why, but it seems like when I get around white people and say about different things, but when I'm around black, African American, I just feel loose for some reason.” I asked him to explain what he felt like when he spoke aloud in other classes. I especially wanted to know this because he was so vocal in our classroom. He said, “I still stay myself, but it's just that the way that I come to things. Like they ask me a question, then I'll say something I wouldn't normally say, like smarter.” To clarify I asked if he tried to formulate answers, and he said he did because,

White people, they want everything to be like real, really good, and neat and stuff, so I try to think a lot harder than I would usually think. But when I'm in your class, I still think about it real hard, but it's not as complex as it would be.

Jared’s statement suggested that he held stereotypical beliefs about people’s quality of work and language based on race, but it also shows that he is very aware of the racial undercurrents that accompany his school experiences in different classes as he works with students who he feels are like him versus those who are not.

*Considered how the world perceives him and how he wanted to respond.* Jared was willing to consider his position in the world around him. It seemed that through his work in our class, he was able to also consider how he would respond to many of the social factors that impacted him as a result of his race.
Jared reported that the project students completed near the end of the year that pushed them to confront a myth others held about them was what he would most remember about our class. In an interview, I asked him, “Of the projects and lessons we've done, which one do you think has had the biggest effect on you? Or, has made you think differently?” Jared quickly answered, “The myth one.” I knew this project in particular was something all students, Jared in particular, were engaged in, mainly because they were given an opportunity to argue against the implicit myths that others unjustly believe about them. Jared’s project focus was on the myth that he was only a strong athlete because he was African American (See Figure 4.9).

1. People think we good at sports because of our skin color
2. “We all have big dreams.” “I would like to end this thought.”
3. “Pound Cake”—Drake
4. People look at my height and think I’m sorry at what I do, or they think that since I’m black, that I’m good.
5. Most people think that Devin is very slow because of his weight or height. They think he should play o-line because of his size.

Script

People think that since I’m black they think I’m good at basketball. I think it’s because most people that’s good at sports are black. That’s not always the case people.

Most people think because of my height or weight they think I slow. Me and my partner (Jared) are going to show you why.

Figure 4.9: Jared’s Notes and Planning for Myth Project

Jared explained that this project was important to him. He said, “Because I get to tell like why, I get to tell why this is not true. Like just because I’m black, that doesn't just mean
I'm good at basketball.” He continued, “Most people in the NBA who are good are black, but there's some white people who are good too.” This statement shows what may seem to be a fairly naïve perspective on racial stereotypes in sports, but for Jared, it was his first time expressing this notice about the world in a school setting. The project seemed to provide him a way to first express these notices about the world and how he felt impacted by them.

During this conversation, Jared shared about how these stereotypes impacted him on a regular basis. He provided a story to illustrate how these myths were a part of his day to day. He shared:

Yeah, 'cause like when I'm outside playing with my friends . . . like Jacob, you know him? He'll be like, aw man, the black guy made the shot, man you so good 'cause you're black. And I'm like, I'm not just the best 'cause I'm black.

I asked Jared to explain how he would respond to Jacob when he said that prior to completing this project. He quickly said, “I just smile.” After completing this project, though, Jared shared that he felt like he now had an answer or a response for that type of situation. He explained his new thinking:

Like people look at us on the outside and just see we're black and that we're good at basketball, and on the inside we're smart and we know a lot more things. Like people that's saying that, we might be smarter than them.

The scenario that Jared shared about playing basketball with a friend and experiencing what his friend seemed to view as joking shows that this type of interaction carries an undertone of racial stereotyping that Jared picked up on. By completing the project and confronting the myth that he is only a good athlete because of his race, Jared was able to
explore a very personal issue that took place in his daily life. Not only was he able to confront those who held that belief, but he was also able to express for the first time in a school setting that there was more to him than his athletic ability.

**Marcus’ response.** Marcus’ experience in my class was quite different than Jared’s. At times his actions suggested he was not engaged; he sometimes put his head down, did not get out materials, and made very little progress on projects or assignments. Almost daily he asked to leave the classroom to go to the restroom or get water. During a whole class discussion about developing a claim and counterclaim during our study of argument writing, for example, he sat quietly working on a Spanish project on his iPad. On another occasion, while the class was preparing for the myth project by reading texts and watching videos to understand what types of myths they could confront, Marcus alternated between having his head down and playing on his phone under the table. During both of these instances, he did not offer any comments to the discussion, and though I redirected him and encouraged him to join in, he did not. At another time, while we watched a video about Eminem, as well as videos about the impact of video games on adolescents, he sat with his head propped in his hand or with his head down.

In spite of these behaviors, though, it was clear that Marcus consistently was listening to what was going on because he was able to engage in conversations with me in small group or in individual conferences. For example, during a whole group lesson on the structure of an argument essay, Marcus sat quietly with his head down, but the following day, when he participated in a small group discussion which involved analyzing the structure of a mentor text, he was able to participate and point out the various parts of the argument essay. Marcus was more outwardly engaged when there
was opportunity for play or collaboration with classmates and when our study focused on athletics or music. Marcus’ most evident engagement occurred near the end of the school year as he worked on the myth project. He was motivated to complete the project and seemed to understand the need to address others’ misunderstandings about his identity in regard to his race.

Marcus also frequently requested to leave the classroom to go to the restroom or get water. This happened often, usually when students were about to move to an independent work time for reading or writing. I had made a decision early in the school year that if students in my class wanted to use the restroom or go get water, I would allow them to go. Though they still asked me to leave the classroom, I rarely denied them the opportunity. I recognized that it was possibly the first time in their school experience they had the freedom to move in and out of the classroom. I hypothesized that Marcus was trying to navigate this new freedom. I kept this in mind as Marcus often chose to leave the classroom, and I decided that my allowing him to navigate this possibly new freedom was more important for him than my denying him such basic human needs.

Despite these behaviors, Marcus was an integral part of our classroom community. He was rarely absent from school, but when he was, we felt his absence. Marcus had quite a presence and was the type of student and classmate that won our positive attention even when he was not trying to. He and I had a strong relationship, and he seemed to understand that I cared about him. Marcus often spent time in my classroom before school and at lunch, just hanging out with friends. On one of these occasions, he said to me, “You know, the only reason my teachers are nice to me is because of you.” When I asked him to explain what he meant, he said, “Because of like stuff you say about
me. You know, good stuff.” Similarly, when another teacher told me to “take care of him” while she was away on a trip, he told us both, “Y’all are both like my mom.” These comments suggest that Marcus felt cared for and supported.

**Responded when curriculum drew on his interests.** Marcus was most engaged when we studied the genre of argument writing by challenging the belief that rap music could lead adolescent listeners toward more violent lifestyles. While discussing what we already knew about rap music, Marcus brought up the fact that there was controversy around Tu Pac's death. He talked easily about whether or not he really died, and that some people thought he was in hiding. Another student brought up another rapper, Chief Keef, who is from Chicago and has been reported as being involved with gang activity. At the end of this discussion, Marcus told us he was from Chicago as well. This instance is one of the only times Marcus shared anything about his personal life outside of school during a whole-class discussion. When I asked Marcus what specific activities from our class stood out as memorable, he said, “Like the rap music and video games and stuff.” He said that writing his argument essay (See Figure 4.10) about why rap music did not cause violence would be the work he most remembered “cause I see and hear people listen to rap music every day, and I see most people riding around listening to it.”

| Hip-hop represents black people and contributed to our American culture. Some people think Rap music makes people violent. Overall, hip-hop has cultural value, educational value, and has contributed to the entertainment industry.  
| Hip-hop has impacted our culture in America. Hip-hop has brought white and black people together. Hip-hop brings different races of people together. Jazz and blues were the first music to be out, and it was a big deal to people in the 20’s. Hip-hop is dominant in every youth culture in every country (Carole Walker).  
| Hip-hop has educational value. Most hip-hop music builds confidence in kids’ lives today. It’s important for people to hear life stories of other peoples so you will know what the world is like. Most people today improved their academic abilities after watching rap videos (Carole Walker). Most hip-hop music makes kids want to do the right things. |
Figure 4.10: Marcus’ Argument Essay

Marcus told me that he had a little trouble in the midst of the argument writing study, but that he did like the topics we were focused on. I asked him if he thought it helped when we used topics he was interested in, and he said it did make a difference “because it's stuff you want to hear and talk about.” Marcus noted that prior to his work, he did not realize rap music could have educational value, but that now he was able to add that reason to why he valued rap music so much. Though he seemed to feel that the focus on rap music drew on his personal interests, he also commented that studying argument writing by looking at issues around basketball or football would have been more interesting to him.

Marcus also shared that he thought he had improved as a writer in our class. In this conversation, he referred specifically to the district’s writing assessment. Students responded to a prompt that focused on why it is important to stay healthy and strong. I asked him if that topic in particular was something that he was familiar with, and he commented that he knew all about the topic. He said it was easy “cause like the stuff that we had to write about, you know what’s healthy and not healthy, I know about that.”

Seemed to be supported by the classroom community. Marcus reflected on the support he felt as a result of the classroom community we had. He noted that ELA class was easier as a seventh grader because the class was single gender and smaller. Our school’s dean also talked with Marcus and shared that he discussed the collaborative
nature of the class. She also noted that like Jared, Marcus focused on the relationships in the class, calling his classmates his best friends who were like his family. Specifically, she mentioned that he felt that when one student understood, the rest were more likely to understand because they helped one another. He shared with her a particular moment when Jared provided him with support. Marcus’ reference to his work with Jared is interesting because I partnered Jared and Marcus because Marcus did not have evidence that supported reasons for rap not promoting violence. Instead, he had just written down random facts. Jared provided him the support that he needed, which illustrated exactly what Marcus mentioned about them being like a team. Throughout their work together, Jared told Marcus what to write, referring back to his articles to show him where the information was coming from. Marcus responded and did what Jared told him to do. This example showed the power of community in Marcus’ learning. He was so often disengaged when we were in a whole group setting, and he often did not respond when I offered advice or direct instruction. He did, however, respond to peer support. During their work time, I worried that Marcus might simply be copying and not really doing the work himself, so I intervened and found the one article that had the most information. Then, I pointed out sections that had information, read them with Marcus and help him think about whether or not it supported his reasons. Jared stayed to help Marcus know when to use certain details to support his argument:

Jared: Yeah, yeah, write what Mrs. Gillaspy said.

Marcus: Write it here?

Jared: Yeah, (reads it to him) ‘hip hop can be traced from its status today as a multi-billion dollar industry.’
Aware of impact of race. Marcus did not engage as openly as Jared did about the issues we explored around race and stereotypes. Both in class discussions and in conversations with me in interviews, his comments were fairly limited and he seemed reserved. I asked him if he had ever had the opportunity to talk about issues around race in school, in particular, issues in his own life. He said that he had not and that it would have been harder to do so in a different class setting. He actually laughed when I asked him if he would feel comfortable mentioning his personal experiences with racial stereotyping in other classes and quickly said that he would not. He explained, “Because like this a class with all my friends, and we can talk about stuff like that.” This statement again shows the importance of classroom community for Marcus. He agreed with me when I shared that I was often nervous that people misunderstood when I brought up race, assuming I was saying something inappropriate simply because of the topic. And in response to my question about whether or not other students in our class understand my concern about race, he assured me that “they get it.” Because he often said so little, I was curious if he liked being in an environment where he felt comfortable talking about it, and he explained that for him, there are times when discussion of race is easy, as well as times when it is not. He explained, “I feel like it's a good thing when you like around people that you know real well, and it feels like some people you just met, you don’t really want to talk about it.” Again, for Marcus, the classroom community was a key component of his classroom experience and his personal exploration of racial issues.

Marcus completed the myth project, and he decided to also confront the myth about him that he is a strong and talented athlete as a result of being an African American (See Figure 4.11). The video he made that showcased his confrontation of this myth
included a line in his introduction from Ellison’s (1952) *Invisible Man*: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (p. 3). In the video, Marcus reads the line as the viewer looks at a blank wall. The decision to use the line about being invisible in particular, and his fairly creative use of reading the line without showing himself on camera, suggested that he was engaged and intentional about his work. Later, during an interview, he reflected on his work and said he felt his work was important “because like people can see how we feel I guess and then they’ll treat us better or something, they get us better.” When I asked him to explain what “they get us better” meant, he said, “Like they starting to think there's good white people and black people at basketball and football.” He went on to explain that perhaps this realization would help people see “that I'm actually smarter. I'm kind of smart and I'm good at basketball too.”

| 1. Most people think black people are better than white people at sports and they think that because we have a lot of black All-stars. |
| 2. “I am invisible, simply because people refuse to see me.” |
| 3. Instrumental music |
| 4. Some think I’m the best at basketball and football because of my color, but that’s not true because there are different races that’s better than black people. I think people think this because there are so many black professionals. |
| 5. Some people think black people are only good at sports. They think all black people are good at basketball. White people are good at basketball too. |

*Figure 4.11*: Marcus’ Notes and Planning for Myth Project

**Conclusion**  
By organizing my collected data as the lived curriculum—my teaching decisions and students’ responses—and Jared and Marcus’ individual responses, I was able to begin considering the relationship between the use of culturally relevant teaching and student engagement. Specifically, I tried to draw on students’ interests, I relied heavily on the classroom community, and I attempted to bring discussions of race into the curriculum. My findings revealed the responsive approach I tried to take within the
curriculum to adjust our direction when students were not engaged. I also was able to
determine from Jared and Marcus’ responses during class observations and interviews
that though their responses were different, they did both seem to feel cared for, supported
within the classroom community, and aware of racial inequities and injustices in their
lives. My close examination of what took place during my study with the students as a
whole group and the two individual students has pushed me to begin considering what
lessons I can learn about student engagement in a classroom where I try to follow
guidelines of culturally relevant teaching, as well as what it means to be a culturally
relevant teacher.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

As intended, this study helped me understand the curriculum my students and I lived (my actions and whole group responses) and the responses of two focal students to that curriculum. I also developed a deeper understanding of how my instructional decisions were culturally relevant and the relationship between those instructional decisions and student engagement. In addition, I considered ways in which I identified as a culturally relevant teacher. Reflecting back on all that I learned, I developed a list of suggestions for other teachers wanting to move toward becoming a culturally relevant teacher and suggested areas for future research.

The Cultural Relevance of My Practice

To determine the cultural relevance of my practices, I examined them using three of the guidelines for culturally relevant teaching I had constructed from various practitioners and researchers (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tatum, 2009; Harmon, 2012; Howard, 2013; Rychly & Graves, 2012):

- The teacher selects culturally relevant texts and engagements that draw on students’ out-of-school literacies and allows for students’ interests to drive the curriculum.
- The teacher creates a classroom environment that is safe and relies on collaborative efforts of all students.
The teacher guides students in critically considering community issues and seeking action to improve those issues.

Relying on culturally relevant texts and engagements. In the beginning of the study, I felt confident about my ability to plan instruction based on students’ out-of-school interests and literacies. Having known my students for a full year prior to the study, I was familiar with their general interests, so I felt I at least had a strong sense of where to begin with making curricular connections to their interests. In retrospect, it is clear that while I attempted to draw on students’ interests in athletics and music, my instructional decisions ranged from strong to weak alignment with this guideline. Our study of language and our unit on argument writing reveal the inconsistencies.

Focus on language. My early focus on students’ language was a first attempt at drawing on students’ lives outside of school. I hoped that asking students to collect data about the language used in their homes would provide us with an entry into discussing the components of figurative language, tone, and mood that are a part of the ELA standards I was required to teach. My original thinking was that by collecting language from students’ homes, I would validate and give depth to much of the daily language they heard and engaged in each day. However, students did not engage in this. I see now that this attempt to draw on their personal language at home was not fueled by their interests. In fact, it is possible that they did not want to record language in their homes because they felt it would not be valued at school. Students’ initial thinking that they would record language that would be considered bad, as indicated by many of their comments early on, suggested that they were aware of the linguistic difference between home and school, and so perhaps their avoidance of this task had something to do with them not
trusting that their language at home had a place in our classroom setting. They may also not have understood the academic significance of studying language or the goal for engaging in this kind of work.

Following this, I turned to something that I knew students’ watched often—media coverage of sports’ events, particularly football and basketball. Students’ response to the interview between a European American, female sportscaster and an African American, male football player they respected and knew well drew on their interests in a more authentic way than my attempt to study language used in their homes. Whereas they avoided the task of recording home language, the students’ engaged response to this activity can be attributed to their first-hand knowledge of the game. I believe I was able to achieve my goal of examining how language created tone and mood because I drew on an interest and prior knowledge the students already had.

To continue our study, I used King’s (1963) “I Have a Dream” speech. The students’ response to this was very different than the excited response they had during the sports interview. Rather than getting up and moving around, they were quieter and more serious. I suspect that students’ familiarity with the speech helped with their engagement, as did the background knowledge they had about King’s impact during the Civil Rights Movement. Their focus during this engagement was a type of response that they did not give at any other point, and I think that was because the text was culturally relevant.

Similarly, their response to the clip from The Cosby Show also elicited a fairly engaged response from the students. I do not think their response had to do with the show itself; it was an older show, one they were not currently watching. Instead, they seemed engaged because the show was about two boys wanting to impress a new girl at school. It
was a coincidence that one of the students had just had a similar interaction with a new
girl at our school, so though I do not take credit for that circumstance, I think the boys’
response was a result of the connection to their actual lives.

**Argument writing.** To introduce argument writing, I began with ideas that I
developed on my own without gathering input from the students. When I first introduced
the three general questions for students to consider, their initial response to these
questions was somewhat flat, as if they did not seem to know how to answer the
questions. They did not express interest in the topic. During small group discussions they
stayed seated, showed little emotional response, and did not demonstrate much
excitement overall with any of the questions. Much like my first attempt to draw on the
language of their homes, the questions I hoped would spurn some interest did not
accomplish that. I see now that while I thought I was relying on their interests, I did so
without including them in the planning.

In my effort to change this pattern, I next asked the students to work in small
groups and create a list of all of the media they liked (movies, television shows, music,
and video games). All of the students immediately began enthusiastically talking about
this, jumping up from their seats in excitement, crowding around the student who was
writing on the group’s chart paper, and naming multiple games, musicians, and movies
that they thought should be added to the list. The interaction between students during this
engagement showed that they were excited to be discussing the topic with classmates,
and they seemed to be engaged in a type of conversation that was natural and typical of
talk between friends. In this instance, the students’ positive response seemed to be tied to
the fact that the task I was asking them to complete relied fully on their out-of-school
literacies—topics they were truly the experts on. Also, the collaborative nature of the task allowed them to engage in discussion with friends as they might outside of the classroom.

Once we determined we would focus on whether or not rap music negatively impacted teens, students immediately began trying to convince me that the argument I encountered in my online research was wrong. Again, because the topic of rap music and video games was a true interest of the students and something they were more knowledgeable about than I was, they seemed to be genuinely invested in the topic. When students subsequently engaged in a discussion about what rappers choose to write about in their music, the students were able to use the knowledge they have about one of their personal interests, rap music, in conversation with friends. As had become typical, some students stood up as they became more excited, and the banter in the classroom increased, yet stayed focused on the topic. In particular, Marcus, who often was not openly engaged and often sat back listening, spoke up and joined this conversation. His interest in Tu Pac had a place in the conversation and his knowledge about the rapper and his life were necessary to the conversation. In reflecting on this instance, it seems clear that this engagement relied fully on the students’ out-of-school literacies, rap music in particular. They were interested in the topic and quickly became invested in the discussion.

When I next showed the interview of Eminem, I thought that the students would become easily engaged, especially since Eminem was mentioned by several students in their initial conversation. The students’ response, however, was not what I expected. A few students seemed engaged and were actively listening, but a couple, Marcus in particular, did not seem to be interested at all. I think part of the reason they were not as engaged was because I chose the rapper and in doing so, took away their opportunity to
have input in who we studied. Similarly, I did not provide students with an opportunity to collaborate. They watched the interview without talking to one another, and I gave them no reason to do so. In rethinking how I could have allowed for more collaboration, I realize I could have set up smaller viewing stations and used more interviews or biographies of rappers and had students watch these in a more natural setting with peers. The conversations they most likely would have had while watching could have been something they drew on in their argument writing. Instead, it is possible that the lack of ability to interact with one another and the focus on the one musician, rather than others they were interested in, limited their engagement.

**Our collaborative community.** I knew as soon as the school year started that my students came into our classroom with a sense of community because so many were friends outside of school, played on sports teams together, and had been in classes together since beginning school. I was very intentional about how I tried to build upon the relationships the students already shared in order to create a feeling similar to that of a team or family. Our class creed, the way in which I grouped students to support learning, and the non-academic activity we engaged in regularly helped to establish and maintain our community.

**Class creed.** Within the first two weeks of school, students and I began working on our class creed, which came to be a daily routine that we used to start our time together. After students collaboratively created the creed, I asked them to all stand and try reading it aloud together. Overall, engagement was low. Several students chose not to read the creed aloud at all and just stood, while two students refused to stand at all. Of the entire group, only four or five students actively read. The students’ reading was awkward,
and, at the conclusion, students were no more focused or ready for our time together than when they arrived. If anything, they were less focused, as they all laughed at what we had just attempted together. The feeling changed, however, when I rearranged the text they had chosen for our creed so that it became a call and response with Devin saying, “We are” and the remaining students calling out the following lines. This simple change led to all students being engaged in the creed, so it eventually became a daily ritual we relied on as a group. In reflecting on the difference between the versions and why the second version worked so much better, I think that the call and response version of our creed was reminiscent of the type of chants the students used on their sports teams before going out on the field or court. Also, the call and response nature of the revised creed was similar to call and response some of the students used during church services. The revised structure of the creed seemed to bring into the classroom a type of interaction students engage in regularly outside of school.

Support for learning. I regularly grouped students either in partner sets or small groups. I tried to give students a variety of group formations daily, moving between whole group, partners, or small groups as often as possible both to keep things lively, but also to show them that I valued the relationships they shared and that I wanted them to use those relationships to support one another as learners. Students responded differently depending on the groupings and task. At times, students who were partnered or grouped were off-task or spent time talking about unrelated topics. Other times, students truly supported one another in their work. For example, Jared and Marcus worked well together when they were paired. It is possible they were successful because they were comfortable showing one another where they struggled as well as what they were
confident with, while some other partners or groups were not as comfortable with one another. I realized that, depending on who students were grouped with, the level of safety could be high or low, which led to students being able or not being able to effectively support one another.

**Non-academic activity.** The final element of my reliance on our collaboration and relationships was centered on regular non-academic activity, I made sure students had time to actively engage in play with one another often. Our unstructured time to be together ultimately strengthened our relationships. The aspect of non-academic activity was the one element of our class that all students wholly engaged in at every opportunity. This unstructured time allowed for students who were the leaders to demonstrate care for others by asking them to join in games, while it also allowed the students who were least comfortable in the group to engage in an activity with their friends with less fear of judgement. Now, months after the study, students still mention our time playing in the gym or on the blacktop outside when I see them in the halls at our school. Though I did try often within the classroom to create opportunities for students to foster relationships, I now feel certain that the regular maintenance of our whole-class community through this non-academic play was the most valuable aspect for helping strengthen our community.

**Bringing race and cultural background into curriculum.** This was the area I struggled most with. Early in the study, the negative response to Sherman’s pre-Super Bowl interview occurred, and I tried to use that because of the connection to football as well as the issues it brought up about race. I also tried to use relevant texts throughout the year that gave students a medium through which to consider issues around race and difference. Near the end of the study, students completed their myth project, which gave
us another opportunity to consider and confront injustices in our lives at school and in our community. Students’ level of engagement in these examples was fairly high, though early on in the year they were less aware or possibly less comfortable openly discussing issues around race.

**Richard Sherman interview.** When I originally heard about Sherman’s post-game interview with Erin Andrews and how numerous responses on social media focused on his lack of class or referred to him as a thug or an embarrassment to the game, I immediately picked up on the racial undertones in the conversation. Because of the connection to football, I thought my students would pick up on this as well, especially since I knew they had all watched the game that led to the controversy. When I showed the students the interview, they were fully engaged because they had all had knowledge about the game and were excited to watch something related to football. When I began asking them questions about the interview, I realized that they had not heard of the controversial conversation that surrounded the interview. I explained to them the response the interview received, but at that point in the year, we were not ready to talk about issues around race as openly as they eventually did. The students did not seem to understand or even care much about the racialized conversation that was taking place about Sherman. They eventually led our conversation to focus on Sherman as a football player and the altercation he had with another player during the game. Though students did not pick up on the issues tied to race in the way I hoped they would, they were fully engaged in the discussion. The conversation we did have, though it did not focus fully on the backlash and language used to describe Sherman, was our first attempt at talking about an issue of race.
Culturally relevant texts focused on injustice. As we moved through the school year, we became more comfortable with one another, and several students, Jared in particular, seemed to want to talk more openly about race. To help foster this type of discussion, I tried to include texts that students could relate to and that would lead to discussions about injustice, stereotypes, and difference. Dunbar’s (1913) “We Wear the Mask” was just one example of the type of texts we read that allowed us to discuss the difference between who we truly are and who we are assumed to be by others. It was while studying this text that Jared questioned why the speaker of the poem felt he had to wear a mask. I wanted to create an opportunity for students to question community issues and consider their personal connections to the issue and how they would respond. In particular, I wanted students to have a place in their school, our classroom, where they could openly discuss injustices they experienced as a result of race. Our use of texts such as Dunbar’s (1913) “We Wear the Mask” and Hughes’ (1990) “Refugee in America,” as well as others, gave us texts through which to begin exploring the ideas. These texts served as a sort of bridge into confronting the issues that most affected them.

Challenging stereotypes. When I asked students to consider a myth that they felt others held about them, they began with ideas about behavior, but within minutes, the conversation turned to race. The students were actively brainstorming the list of myths they felt people held about them. Students were standing up, coming to the board where we created our list, and engaging openly in a lively discussion. Jared and Marcus both shared with me that this was the first opportunity they had ever had in school to talk about who they truly were and what others assumed about them in terms of race. The thoughts both of these students shared, as well as those of others, revealed to me the need
for students to have opportunities in school to address and challenge what others
considered to be true about them.

I considered Marcus’ response to this assignment as particularly telling of the
importance of the work they were doing. Marcus regularly chose to disengage throughout
the school year, perhaps because I had not created the type of opportunity that I did in
this assignment. In this instance, however, Marcus completely surprised me and took the
lead with his partner and created the plan for their video and script. I think that this
assignment provided Marcus with a medium through which to talk about an issue that
was important to him. I think the connection for him was the most authentic he probably
felt during the entire school year, and as a result he never seemed to get frustrated by the
work of completing the assignment as he often did. Instead, he fully engaged in the task.
His response to this activity reminded me of the importance of both considering the
individual experiences of students and what types of opportunities they might need to use
their voices to respond to issues they face in their lives.

The Relationship between Culturally Relevant Practice and Student Engagement

After reflecting on the students’ responses to the various components of the lived
curriculum through the lens of three of the guidelines of culturally relevant teaching that
I originally set for myself, I came to understand more about the relationship of CRP and
student engagement. I identified four pathways to engagement: students were most
engaged when 1) they had out-of-school knowledge about the topic, 2) they could make a
personal connection with the topic, 3) they were involved in play as a means of learning,
and 4) they had an authentic purpose or outcome as a result of their engagement. When I
tried to have students approach learning from any other angle, they struggled to engage in a meaningful way.

**Students engaged when they had prior knowledge.** The concept of students needing background knowledge is not a new concept in teaching (Marzano, 2004), but through my study, I came to view students’ prior knowledge in a new way. Previously, I focused on giving students background knowledge on concepts or content that I thought they lacked. I also did not make a connection between their interests and their knowledge. In my study, I came to understand that prior knowledge as a much broader concept—one which encompasses’ out-of-school literacies (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), the things that people are not just interested in but also knowledgeable about. After much reflection, I have come to understand that students’ interests are tied to their out-of-school literacies—things they talk about regularly, consider often, are knowledgeable about, and want to continue to learn about whether in the school setting or not.

Early in the study, when students watched the post-football game interview between Sherman and Andrews, I realized that they had not just watched the game the weekend before. Instead, they knew the game. Students talked about details about the two players, Sherman and Crabtree, and also discussed an interaction they had on the field, and then made personal connections discussing how they would have responded as a way of making sense of Sherman’s reaction in the interview. Prior to completing my study, I would have called this just an interest—football—but now I see that this is a topic that students were interested in and knowledgeable about.
I saw a similar response from students during our study of the argument genre of writing when we focused on rap music. Again, my original perspective was that rap music was an *interest*. I knew students listened to rap music because I overheard them talking about it and letting one another listen to music in class. During our conversations in class, however, I came to realize that rap music was another of the students’ out-of-school literacies. Like their knowledge of football and athletics, they were knowledgeable about rap music; it was an integral part of their lives. Jared, during an interview, exemplified the view of rap music as an out-of-school literacy when he explained “Um, well for me, it's easy for me because I know like, I know about rap.” He mentioned that when we were reading the articles about the young girl who sailed alone, that he did not know about sailing, but that “when we was watching the Eminem thing and after that, we started talking about Tu Pac and Biggie Smalls and all that, I know about them, so yeah, I know about that.” Prior to completing my study, while I valued students’ interests, I do not think I truly validated their interests as *knowledge*. After completing the study, I now more fully understand that by simply shifting my view of *interest* to *knowledge*, I am more likely to recognize the multiple out-of-school literacies my future students bring into the classroom.

**Students engaged when they had a personal connection.** It became clear that my students were most engaged when they had a personal connection to or interest in the topic, text, or activity we were involved in, so I began to use those personal connections as a pathway to engagement (Kirkland, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011).
Students’ personal connections were often founded on experiences they had with others at school or home. For example, early in the year when students created our class creed, they initially appeared to have no real connection to it. However, once I adjusted the structure so that the creed took on a new form and began to resemble pre-game chants they used often before football or basketball games with teammates, the creed became more meaningful to them. Similarly, several students made a religious connection to the creed, commenting that the leader, Devin, sounded like a preacher in their churches. The change in students’ engagement as a result of a revision in structure revealed to me that when students can make a personal connection based on a lived experience, they are more likely to engage.

Another example of their personal connection was when we watched the clip from *The Cosby Show*. Because the clip showed two characters, Theo and Cockroach, working up the nerve to talk to a new girl at their school, the students made an immediate connection because together they had just encouraged Devin to talk to a new student at our school. Students immediately picked up on this, and though it was a humorous moment among them as a group of friends, the connection helped them consider how the two characters adjusted their language from when they were talking with one another versus the new student. Much like my new understanding of prior knowledge, after completing my study, I also have a renewed perspective on the types of connections students make. In both of these examples, the connections depended on personal experiences the students had outside of the classroom. I now see that by valuing all of the experiences students have, I am able to create a pathway to engagement that I otherwise would miss.
Students engaged when they were at play. A third pathway to engagement that I discovered for my students was the use of play in the classroom. We often engaged in competitive play. I initially included play as a way of building community. However, once I realized that students all engaged in the games they were playing, I tried to incorporate play in more purposeful ways, usually whenever I felt that we needed to focus on the more mundane aspects of ELA curriculum. Two examples mentioned earlier were the use of Tips for reviewing word parts or vocabulary and darts to revise sentence types. Because these types of study were just brief parts of our work within a class period, I was able to use play as a method; students were able to have physical activity while also practicing application of skills. Focusing on what students were most interested in increased their engagement.

Students engaged when they saw purpose in the task. A final pathway to engagement that I defined through my study was that my students engaged when they recognized an intrinsic purpose in the tasks before them (Cambourne, 1995). I do not think I had ever fully considered the personal purposes students might find in the work I ask them to complete in my ELA class. During the study, however, it became clear that all of the students, including Jared and Marcus, were more involved with tasks when they were purposeful to them. For example, the comments Jared made while we were reading and discussing Dunbar’s (1913) “We Wear the Mask.” suggested that he understood the concept of having to wear a mask on two levels. He understood the difference of having to show one version of himself when he was at school or with friends, but that at home he could take off his mask. He also seemed to try to make sense of the speaker’s experience of having to wear a mask because he was an African American man. He later applied this
new thinking in his work on the myth project in which he confronted the myth about people’s belief that he was a skilled athlete as a result of his race. He told me that project was the one he thought he most changed from “because I get to tell like why, I get to tell why this is not true. Like just because I'm black, that doesn't just mean I'm good at basketball.” For Jared, considering new ideas about race and addressing stereotypes were purposeful for him and, as a result, he engaged with the assignment.

Marcus’ response was even more telling. Throughout the school year, Marcus often appeared to be disengaged. Though he always completed his work, he did so with some prodding from his classmates and me. When we began the myth project, however, Marcus engaged more than he did with any other lesson or task through the year. His reflection after completing the project suggested to me that he saw a need for this type of work. Indeed, he remarked that he thought confronting myths such as being a strong athlete as a result of his race was necessary “because like people can see how we feel I guess and then they'll treat us better or something, they get us better.” He said that perhaps people would understand “that . . . I’m kind of smart and I’m good at basketball too.” During my first year with Marcus, I felt he was very aware of racial inequities in his life and school, so his openness about his feelings helped me understand the importance of this type of opportunity for students in school. Marcus’ response to this assignment helped me understand what authentic purpose looks like. As a result, in my current work with students, I focus on tasks that serve authentic functions for students.

Each of these pathways places value on the students’ out-of-school literacies and experiences. To define these pathways to learning, I had to live through and study a year with my students in which I attempted to create a classroom experience that valued the
various resources the students brought to school. I now am able to recognize possibilities in the curriculum that I had not seen in my previous teaching with these students the prior year or with students in years past. I understand now that engagement is more likely to occur when students are valued as knowledgeable people with meaningful experiences and provided with a curriculum that serves a real function for them.

**Becoming a Culturally Relevant Teacher**

In the literature (Bondy et al., 2012; Dillon, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Hyland, 2009; Milner, 2008; Phillippo, 2012; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; Wiggan, 2008) the culturally relevant teacher is defined as having caring relationships with students and believing all students can learn and achieve academically. In the beginning of this study, I had many questions about the curriculum I would teach. I worried about being able to authentically integrate African American language, finding the right culturally-relevant texts, being knowledgeable enough about cultures other than my own to be taken seriously by my students. The one thing I felt confident in, however, was my belief in the students I worked with, particularly Jared and Marcus. During this study, I tried to demonstrate a level of care that showed the students I truly believed in their ability to learn and achieve, but that I also cared for them as individuals (Gay, 2010; Tatum, 2009). I tried to place value on the topics they cared about, and as a result I formed the strongest relationships with students that I have had in my career.

As I found in the literature (Kirkland, 2011; Wiggan, 2008) and have experienced in my own teaching experience, students are aware of the teacher’s disposition and often respond more positively to teachers who they view as supportive or an ally. I have come to more fully understand how important it is for students to feel cared for at school. Both
Jared and Marcus expressed that they felt cared for. Jared commented that he felt comfortable in our classroom because of his close relationships with classmates and me. Marcus interpreted me talking positively about him with other teachers as my caring for him. The students’ responses suggest that both Jared and Marcus were aware of how invested in their lives I was. They both reported feeling comfort in the classroom, which I interpret as their feeling cared for.

A significant part of feeling cared for is feeling believed in. When I considered the educational history that many of my students, especially Jared and Marcus, carry with them, it was no wonder they sometimes felt unsure about their ability to achieve academically. When teachers demonstrate a concern for students’ well-being (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011 & Wiggan, 2008) as well as a genuine belief in their ability (Ladson-Billings, 2009) by holding high expectations for their academic performance (Phillippo, 2012 & Wiggan), students are more likely to work toward those expectations. Marcus, in particular, seemed aware that I was concerned about how he was performing, not just in my class, but in other classes as well. As he said, “You stay on us”—his way of acknowledging that he was aware of my expectation for him to do well in school.

One of my greatest concerns as I planned for and began my study was focused on my position as a European American teacher trying to do work around race. Throughout the study, I had to consider my position in the classroom and whether or not it had an impact on the work I was trying to engage in with students. This left me with a stronger sense of my racial identity. I also now have a greater understanding of the importance of including exploration of race in the curriculum. I saw that, for Jared and Marcus in particular, our class’ focus was their first experience in a class using a curriculum that
included texts and engagements that provided a reason to question and discuss issues related to race.

**Understanding my racial identity.** Though I initially wanted to focus only on the students, I now see that my experience in trying to intentionally support students of color in my classroom is part of the story I can share with others. Specifically, I now find myself in a more reflective position after completing the study, and I see the importance of exploring how my racial identity (Michael, 2015; Stevenson, 2014) impacted my thinking and approach to this study. The lessons of overlooking racial difference as a means of acceptance that I learned as a child and enacted as a teen and young adult carried me for quite a while as I worked with students in my classroom and eventually teachers as a literacy coach. By not focusing on cultural background, I felt that I was ensuring equality for my students and providing an inclusive classroom environment. What I did not see at the time was that my colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) lens prevented me from seeing that my students’ lived experiences were different from mine, and that by ignoring our cultural backgrounds, I was missing an integral part of who we all are and the various resources that could support learning in the classroom.

Eventually, I began to recognize disparities among groups of students based on race, which carried me a bit further toward being able to openly address issues of race. For example, as their sixth grade teacher, I observed Jared and Marcus as they adjusted to both the demands of middle school—having seven different teachers throughout their school day, changing classes, navigating social changes with friends, managing their time, and taking on more responsibility for their academics—and their position in a sixth-grade class of 320 students that was 77% European American and only 23% students of
color. At this time, I simply noticed that the students of color were often overlooked because the school itself was predominantly European American and middle class. I believe that many teachers took the same approach I once took of being colorblind, not seeing race and culture as something to recognize, value, and build on. I became very aware of what Edelman (2014) referred to as she warned educators to watch for “the subtle as well as the overt ways in which we treat non-White and White children . . . differently.” Specifically, I recognized the challenge for students to establish who they would be in middle school and beyond when their rich cultural resources and their out-of-school literacies were overlooked in the classroom.

While I did not see or hear any teachers talking about how to incorporate more culturally sensitive teaching practices or draw on students’ out-of-school literacies, I did see that students of color, particularly African Americans, were being overly identified as low performing and as discipline problems. After the school’s opening year, African American males at RMS were identified as a sub-group due to low performance on the annual standardized assessment and were more likely to be referred to the discipline office than European American students. During the year prior to the study, I was aware of and concerned about what seemed to be a view of students of color that did little to draw on their cultural knowledge or resources in the academic realm and focused instead on discipline referrals and consequences for behaviors deemed unacceptable. As we ended the opening school year, I remember feeling a bit lost in terms of what to do with my awareness. My thinking had shifted significantly over the previous years, but I still had not taken any action toward trying to improve the school experience of students of color, nor had I spoken out about the inequalities I observed in our school setting.
I remember distinctly when I realized that perhaps my colorblind view of students was faulty. During a course titled Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy, I was involved in a conversation with other classmates discussing multicultural teaching (Irvine, 2003; Nieto, 1999). I remember one classmate, a fifth grade teacher at the time, saying she would openly recognize students of particular cultural backgrounds if there was a curricular connection. She mentioned that she would ask the student for input or insight on the topic, celebrating their cultural knowledge. My immediate thinking at the time was that such focus on a student’s culture was not positive attention at all, but that it would instead direct negative attention by singling him or her out.

Fortunately, my thinking eventually shifted, and now I am able to reflect and see what led me to think in the way I once did. I now see that though my thinking was intended to be in support of a student, I was wrong. I once thought focusing on a student’s culture in such an honest way was negative because as a European American, I had likely internalized an idea that bringing attention to race is much too closely linked to inappropriate conversation bordering on racism (Bolgatz, 2005; Michael, 2015). Perhaps this is a result of my upbringing that was based on seeing race and accepting it by overlooking the various differences among varying cultural background; perhaps my thinking was a result of my context in the South where there is a constant reminder of racial difference, often in very binary terms; or perhaps it was because I was afraid that if I talked about race or focused on a students’ cultural background, I would not be able to ensure that the focus was supportive and helpful. I most definitely did not feel capable of discussing race openly, and I did not trust that in my classroom context the discussion
would not become hurtful (Bolgatz; Michael; Stevenson, 2014). My intention at the time was to protect and support students.

Though my intentions and feelings for students was in the right place, my avoidance of race overlooked a meaningful part of who my students were and are and therefore resulted in me missing numerous opportunities to connect with and celebrate all that they knew. The conversation with a classmate in a doctoral seminar has stayed with me, and I credit it as a pivotal moment that pushed me to think beyond what I felt comfortable with. I questioned what my next step should be in my school setting. My awareness of the way students of color, particularly African American males, were being portrayed in my school is what eventually led me to want to conduct the study. I was curious about how a more culturally relevant classroom environment could support students by possibly increasing engagement rather than viewing them as not fitting in and causing a problem.

After a year with Jared and Marcus as sixth graders, I knew that whether I felt fully competent or not, I needed to move forward in trying to provide a more inclusive and responsive learning environment for them. I realized that I needed to modify my instruction so that the curriculum I provided them and others showed that I was invested in who they truly are and that I valued the numerous resources they brought to school from their homes based on their out-of-school literacies. I wanted to create a curriculum which would draw on their interests, provide them with texts that they could connect with (Edelman, 2014; Freeman & Freeman, 2004), and give them an opportunity to explore how they were perceived by others and how they would like to respond to that perception. I realize now, well after completing the study, that in this case it was my early
intention to provide a more equitable school experience for my students of color which helped me determine the content I would teach. At the time, I felt that overall, Jared and Marcus, as well as other students, were not engaged in curriculum or learning that either drew on their backgrounds or interests. I realized that I needed to provide a more relevant ELA experience for them as seventh graders, which led me to reconsider the curriculum I would have originally offered and draw instead on what I felt they would be more responsive to.

Because I felt like I had only come into this way of thinking in the few years prior to conducting my study, I was very nervous about what shape these changes would take, how I would implement them, and if I could be successful. After completing my literature review, I felt that much of what was considered culturally relevant required personal cultural knowledge that I did not necessarily have or share with my students of color. For example, I worried at great length about not understanding cultural norms, how to establish myself as a trusted ally with students, how to share my thinking about race without saying something that would be misinterpreted as hurtful. Before conducting the study, I thought this hesitance came from my lack of understanding about culturally relevant teaching. Now, on the other side, I see that my hesitance was fueled by my lack of “racial competence” (Michael, 2015), or my ability to discuss race openly and comfortably. This was a concept that I did not think applied to me because I was aware of the problem, and I could easily recognize oppression and injustice in my school. Recognizing inequality was only the first step, but I was still not confident in how to talk about race or how to help my students talk about race. As a European American teacher who had only worked in predominately European American middle or lower-middle class
school contexts, I was not experienced or well-versed in talking with others about race. My teaching context compounded with my upbringing gave me little preparation for how to go about discussing issues around race with my students. Because of my hesitance to talk openly about race with students, especially early on, I founded my teaching decisions first on paying very close attention to students’ interests, which gave us a way to begin our year together. I continued to rely on this focus throughout the year, but over time, began to see that we had developed a strong classroom community that I could rely on as we moved toward discussing race, and eventually I did feel that the students and I had a trusting relationship that allowed us to begin recognizing and more openly addressing issues around race.

**Curriculum that explores race.** Since completing the study, I now more fully understand the importance of creating curriculum in my ELA class that explores issues surrounding culture and race. Because I was guided by sociocultural (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986) and critical theories (Dewey, 1995; Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994), I believed already that I should draw on students’ cultural backgrounds and guide them in thinking critically about the world they live in, but I had not previously done so with such intention or purpose. In particular, I more fully understand the need for conversations that allow students to both draw on their cultural knowledge and explore their understandings of other cultures as well as how their culture is perceived and positioned in their worlds. Both Jared and Marcus agreed that the conversations we had about race in our class were the first they had engaged in at school, and both students admitted that they would not feel comfortable having similar discussions in other classes or in previous years of school. These
reflections reveal that for these two students, at least, they have either not had opportunities to explore such ideas so freely or that they never felt they could. The need for these types of conversation, and classrooms in which students feel safe enough to engage, are important, especially during middle school, which for students is a time of change and growth as they determine who they are and who they want to be in the future. A significant part of that search for identity is founded in students’ cultural backgrounds or races (Rogoff, 2003; Tatum, 1997; Villegas & Lucas, 2007), and though it may be discussed at home, I now am more aware of the need for it be discussed at school (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Delpit, 2012; Edwards et al., 2010; Tatum, 2009). Students are in the midst of a great deal of self-discovery and change during the middle level formative years, and because we often do not directly acknowledge culture or race in traditional school settings, we overlook a major factor in the foundation of who children are—where they come from.

Just as I was raised to not see color or difference, in school we teach a type of tolerance that is intended to teach students to accept all people, but falls short because by not acknowledging the deep cultural factors at play, we overlook the rich resources our students bring with them to school. I tried to provide opportunities through the curriculum for students to discuss their thinking about race. Jared participated more openly in these class engagements and discussions, but even though Marcus was not as involved during class, he did share during interviews that he was aware of the impact of race in his life. Though we began these discussions earlier in the year, the most meaningful conversations seemed to occur while students confronted a myth people held
about them. Both Jared and Marcus considered the myth of their athletic talent as a result of their race. Related to this issue, Tatum (1997) wrote,

In the contexts of predominantly White schools . . . black boys may enjoy a degree of social success, particularly if they are athletically talented. The culture has embraced the Black athlete. But even these young men will encounter experiences that may trigger an examination of their racial identity (p. 58).

Both students had experienced what Tatum referred to as “social success” (1997, p. 58) because of their athletic talent; however, each student verbalized a belief that people only thought he was a talented athlete because of his race. The opportunity to confront a myth gave Jared and Marcus a venue to challenge what they felt others wrongly believed. Being able to confront this type of racial stereotype openly in a school setting was the first experience either student had to discuss race in this way. Jared reflected in an interview that the majority of discussion around race was related to “the old times,” meaning slavery or the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 60’s. While he acknowledged that lessons focused on the injustice against African Americans in history, what I took from Jared’s statement was that he was not ever engaged in discussion of his experience as a young African American male in our current society in a classroom setting. Through my reflection on the students’ experiences and the instances in which they seemed most authentically engaged, I have come to understand the need for curriculum that addresses issues of race in a culturally relevant classroom. Though the role of culture and race was the aspect I felt most hesitant about as I began trying to follow guidelines of culturally relevant teaching, I now see the benefit of pushing myself
because my students engaged in an experience that gave them a voice they had not
previously had in a school setting.

**Implications for Teachers Interested in Culturally Relevant Teaching**

Based on my experiences and reflection while conducting my study, I have three
suggestions for other teachers interested in implementing culturally relevant teaching
strategies in their classrooms:

1. Recognize that culturally relevant teaching is based on best practice teaching
   strategies.
2. Create space for curricular connections to race and culture.
3. Reflect on your own racial identity.

Culturally relevant teaching is based on best practice teaching that impacts *all* students,
not only students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Recognizing that much of what we
already know about effective teaching is present in culturally relevant teaching serves as
a support in moving toward what may be the newer element of making curricular
connections to students’ cultural backgrounds, which requires an openness for the
discussion of the impact of race in our lives. Based on my experience, I believe teachers
also need to spend time uncovering their own racial identities.

**Recognize that culturally relevant teaching is based on best practice teaching strategies.** At the beginning of my study, I was hesitant about my ability to be a
culturally relevant teacher. After learning about culturally relevant teaching and realizing
that the tenets of the approach could help me support my students of color, I began to
think about culturally relevant teaching as something to be attained or achieved,
something that was a bit out of my reach. Though I struggled with what it meant to be a
culturally relevant teacher, I came to understand that culturally relevant teaching is founded on teaching practices that are foundational in any successful classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). I encourage other teachers who are interested in trying to implement elements of culturally relevant teaching in their own practice to first recognize that some of the foundational aspects are most likely already present in their classrooms. The teacher’s investment in understanding who students are by paying attention to their out-of-school literacies, knowledge, and interests (Kirkland, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011), as well as the focus on creating strong, collaborative classroom communities (Dewey, 1938; Gay, 2010; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Tatum, 2013), is not a new idea, and came as a comfort to me as I felt that I was trying something new. For teachers who are wanting to move in the direction of more culturally responsive teaching, it is reassuring to first understand that much of what we already know about effective teaching seems to serve as a foundation. Trusting in lessons we have already learned about the importance of getting to know students, working to build upon prior knowledge, helping students make connections to their learning, and developing strong relationships with students serves as a sort of bridge for teachers wanting to move to what for me was the area I lacked experience in—creating curricular opportunities to discuss and explore race in the classroom.

For example, I was reminded during my study that the teacher’s disposition—her investment in students’ lives and the work to build relationships with them (Bondy et al., 2012; Dillon, 1989; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2008; Phillippo, 2012; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; Wiggan, 2008) as well as her belief that all students are capable of learning (Gay; Hyland, 2009; Ladson-Billings)—are the most essential
elements. Secondly, I was reminded of the importance of classroom community and collaborative relationships among students. Teachers’ work to support students in becoming a learning community (Dewey, 1938; Gay; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Tatum, 2013) creates another necessary foundation. I knew that my students and I had a community in which I could try new approaches because of the trust we shared. In my setting, I had a year prior to conducting my study to develop those relationships, but I encourage other educators to focus first on creating that sense of trust and care for one another before trying to implement new strategies fueled by culturally relevant teaching. Finally, for me, like most teachers, student engagement and learning is the ultimate goal and intended outcome. Essentially, the work of implementing culturally relevant teaching is based on a need to improve one’s teaching to strengthen student engagement. The attention to students’ individual lives, backgrounds, out-of-school literacies, and interests drove my understanding of culturally relevant teaching and as a result helped me have a better understanding of the pathways to engagement for my students. It is important for other educators to understand that culturally relevant teachers seek to uncover all that students bring to school in order to continue building upon the various knowledge and resources they already have from home (Dillon; Ladson-Billings).

**Create space for curricular connections to race and culture.** Once teachers understand that the foundations of culturally relevant teaching are the foundations of best practice, I suggest they begin moving toward a curriculum that creates space for the consideration of culture and race and its impact on our lived experiences. However, it is essential to remember that without a safe and trusting community, moving into issues of race could lead to conversations that have hurtful results.
Part of my initial hesitance with introducing topics around race was that in my school context, a predominantly European American middle class setting, issues of race were not openly discussed at all. Rather, discussion around race often seemed to be derogatory or seemed to identify race as a problem or the cause of problems such as low academic performance, behavior, or interactions between students. I suggest other educators critically consider the school context they are working in and how that context has either provided for previous examination of race, whether with positive or negative outcomes, or has ignored issues around race. With a better understanding of context, educators will be more intentional in thinking about how to approach discussions of race in their specific contexts. At times, I have wondered if I am hypersensitive to the possibility of unintentionally saying the wrong thing or seeming hurtful when talking about race. I understand that this is part of my identity and perhaps my context in the South; however, I think it is necessary to be cautious and ensure that students will be supported through these types of discussion rather than come away feeling that they were talked about in a negative or hurtful way.

I found it helpful to begin with an area of student interest as a way of creating a purpose or need for discussing race. I began with a focus on language, but quickly revised my thinking to connect more to athletics in my first attempt to discuss race. At that point, my students and I were not ready to comfortably talk about race, but their response to the topic of athletics gave me a thread throughout the school year that I could eventually focus on in our end of the year discussion about myths people believe to be true, often based on our races. For many students, as was true for me, the opportunity to talk about race in a school setting was a first experience. By grounding it in an area of
interest, students could feel more comfortable and willing to share their thoughts. Fortunately, an ELA classroom requires the use of texts, which supports and strengthens the discussion. For example, my students’ discussion of poetry and excerpts from other texts gave them an opportunity to engage with text and use that text for the purpose of exploring concepts around race, particularly injustices and the impact of prejudice. I found that through texts students, Jared in particular, were able to ask questions and openly discuss their understandings of race within a space that welcomed uncertainty and allowed them to come to their own understandings. Finally, I suggest that other educators create an opportunity through an assignment or project that allows students to determine how they will respond to their new understandings of race. For my students, the myth project provided that opportunity. The project gave them the chance to try out their voice in response to issues of race, an opportunity they had not previously had in school. Educators who are hoping to support students in taking next steps with their thinking about racial injustice or inequality, whether it be through a response or more forward action, can create a purposeful opportunity for this type of generative dialogue or action by creating assignments or projects that call on students to do so.

**Reflect on your own racial identity.** Finally, it is important for educators attempting to implement culturally relevant teaching to engage in reflection on their own racial identity, and be open to new understandings about their beliefs, and often misunderstandings, of others as a result of race. For quite some time, I did not recognize what an impact the childhood lessons I learned about race had on my view of students. Though I was fortunate that the lessons I learned did have a message of acceptance, until I recognized that I had tried to overlook differences, I could not truly see the
opportunities I had to engage students and make curricular connections to their backgrounds. I now more fully understand the impact of my racial identity on the way I once overlooked cultural background and why I felt so hesitant to move toward more open discussion about issues of race with my students. My recommendation for other educators is to closely examine their racial identity, uncovering the ideas about race, culture, and difference they hold as truths. It is crucial in doing work in the classroom around race to think beyond what we think we know to be true about race and how it impacts our lives, and instead attempt the work of truly confronting the beliefs we hold and considering how we came to believe them. Without this awareness of myself, I would not have recognized the need to include a focus on race in my classroom, nor would I have understood how to approach the conversation in a way that would most support my students.

**Implications for Researchers: Questions for Further Study**

After completing the study, I am aware I have much more to learn about how to incorporate a deeper focus on culture and race in my curriculum. My work in this study gave me a sense of what could be, and made me hopeful for the depth of understanding that I want to help students reach in understanding their racial identities, how they see race at work in their favor or against them in society, and how they will choose to respond or take action as a result. If anything, my shallow dive into what for me were murky waters of culturally relevant teaching has given me a stronger urge to continue my own and encourage others to do work around race with underrepresented groups of students in public school settings.
With this in mind, I believe we need further study about students’ responses to culturally relevant instruction, especially in the middle grades. More expansive research could more deeply explore the experiences of students in culturally relevant classrooms by looking at individual students’ experiences, as well as how whole groups of students experience this approach to teaching. My focus was on the experience of African American male students, and more studies are needed in this area but studies are also needed which focus on students’ racial identities and understandings, whether they be from non-dominant or dominant cultures. There is also a need for these studies focusing on males and females. By focusing closely on how students respond and reflect as part of culturally relevant curriculum and instruction, we as educators could come to better understand the support for learning that students need.

In conjunction with continued focus on the students’ experiences, I also see a need for further study focused on whether or not European American teachers can effectively implement culturally relevant teaching practices in a way that helps African American students, or other students of color, feel that their teachers are their allies. This was the area in which I felt most unsure about myself as a teacher. As a European American female teacher, I was very aware of my position in the classroom, and I wanted to make sure that students could explore their cultural backgrounds with confidence that I was an advocate. Some of the literature focused on culturally relevant teaching supports the idea that African American students need African American teachers who can make more authentic cultural connections with students and who have similar cultural knowledge as students (Hefflin, 2002; Milner, 2008). I understand that African American students may more easily find an ally in an African American teacher, and as a European
American teacher who understood the limitation of my cultural background when working to make authentic connections with my students, I was constantly questioning whether or not I could help my students feel that I, too, was their ally. It was my goal to help my students explore how they were perceived by the world and how they would respond. I think further study that focuses on the implementation of culturally relevant teaching practices with teachers and students of different cultures could add to the discussion and would provide support for teachers who want to provide the most effective classroom experience for all students.

Because in my study, I only began to uncover the students’ thoughts on their experiences with stereotyping based on race, I see a need for further exploration on students’ daily experiences in schools. In our school and community setting, I think many of the experiences Jared and Marcus began to explore are not as blatantly unjust as in some places, but in some ways these more subtle markers of difference, such as Jared’s friend commenting on the “black dude” making a shot while playing basketball, could do more damage simply because they seem to be unseen, and therefore overlooked. Jared, in particular, seemed to recognize the aspects of difference that his classmates perceived, which was revealed by his questions about how he was treated differently by others. For example, he asked about what he viewed as European American females not wanting to have real conversations or spend time with him while they would do so with other European American male classmates. This example suggested that Jared was very aware of difference based on race and how he was wrongly perceived by others. In my study, I felt that I was only just beginning to engage in discussion about such serious questions with students. I very much see a need for further study about the experiences of African
American students in predominately European American school contexts as they negotiate racial stereotypes that are often unseen by the majority of students and teachers. Having this deeper understanding would give teachers more of a sense of what their students of color are experiencing as they attend school each day, which would continue to guide them in making curricular decisions that provide them with a supportive and equitable classroom experience.

**Conclusion**

**Reflections on my learning.** By analyzing the lived curriculum and the responses of my students, and my two focus students in particular, I learned about the relationship between my culturally relevant teaching strategies and my students’ engagement, which helped me to more deeply understand what it means to be a culturally relevant teacher. Specifically, by adjusting my instructional approach according to their responses, I recognized that my close alignment with culturally relevant teaching guidelines helped my students engage in the learning. Students engaged in my instruction when they had prior knowledge of the topic, could make a personal connection, could engage in some type of play, and could see authentic purpose in the task.

Conducting my study not only helped me understand the link between culturally relevant teaching and student engagement, it also confirmed much of what I thought to be true about culturally relevant teaching and it led me to a new insight. I came into my study with an understanding that culturally relevant teachers worked to develop meaningful, trusting relationships with students so that students felt cared for within their community of learners. I also believed that culturally relevant teachers held high expectations for their students’ learning and performance. While I felt confident in my
ability to act on these beliefs in the classroom, I quickly realized that in order to provide the type of authentic learning opportunities that my students needed in order to feel cared for and pushed to learn, I had to include the exploration of culture and race in our curriculum. I had to reflect deeply on my racial identity and how it impacted me as a teacher, acknowledging that I had once tried to avoid race in hopes of overlooking our differences.

Overall, by conducting this study, I:

- **Confirmed** my belief that culturally relevant teachers work to develop meaningful, trusting relationships with students, have high expectations for students’ learning, and believe all student can achieve.
- **Refined** my thinking about the relationship between culturally relevant teaching and student engagement.
- **Deepened** my understanding of the need for exploration of race and culture in my teaching, which required reflection on my racial identity.

**Reflections on my students.** When I reflect on my students, their lives, and their contributions to my teaching career, I see young men who are bright, talented, and who have before them great opportunities. I hope I confirmed for them their belief in themselves. I hope that through the relationships we shared as a classroom community they felt valued, that they belonged, and that their voices and feelings mattered. As I conclude my study, I return to the fact that people can be terribly cruel, and my African American and Latino students have and will face injustices I will never know simply because of the color of my skin. Each time another story breaks about the death of a young African American or Latino man, there is always a comment amid the flurry of
social media postings and new stories that reads something like, *Hold your children closer, hug them tighter*. I understand this sentiment. It is our first inclination to hold on to what we care for—our children, spouses, parents, siblings—and our students.

I think, though, that we have to do more than hold them close. I think we have to help all of our children—our students—understand the role that race and culture play in our society and how they can take action, personally and socially, to alter that society. In this way, perhaps, the voices, now in the minority, will become the voice of the majority, and perhaps young men like my students will join the conversation. My deepest hope is that through my actions during their seventh-grade year, my students, African American, European American, and Latino, will have taken the first step toward beginning to understand they can change the national conversation; they and the rest of their generation can speak with one voice—all protesting against and working to change the inequities they face in their daily lives.

While I realize that in the 2013-2014 school year, I only began to chip away at the questions and ideas about race and privilege that both I and my students had, I came away more confident about my ability to do more and go deeper into the various issues surrounding race that impact our lives each day. By paying attention to my students’ interests and prior knowledge and by making those part of our curriculum, not only did I become a better teacher who is more aware of what it possible, but I hope that I gave my students a classroom experience where they truly felt valued and cared for, where they felt they belonged. I hope they felt their voices mattered in our classroom and that they will come to understand that their voices matter beyond the classroom because their
questioning of their worlds and new thinking can contribute to the creation of a more equitable and just society.
References


McDonald, R., & Baker, G. (2001). *I'm already there.* (Lonestar, Performer)


Appendix A: Interview Question Guide

Interview One

- Will you describe your experience in ELA classes in elementary school and middle school? What has your general feeling about ELA classes been over your years in school?
- How did you feel as a reader and writer in previous ELA classes? Can you describe a time that you felt that way?
- What have you liked best about ELA class in the past? Explain.
- What have you liked least about ELA class in the past? Explain.
- Is there a certain project or assignment that you remember enjoying from a past ELA class?
- Do you remember as a 6th grader or in elementary school ELA classes, a teacher creating lessons or choosing texts that related to you personally (your interests, hobbies, family experiences, etc.)? Could you describe any?
- What do you remember about your transition from elementary to middle school ELA classes? What was the same or different?
- What qualities make a great ELA teacher? Can you think of examples from your previous ELA teachers that helped you decide on these qualities?
- What do you think could have made any of your past ELA class experiences better for you?
• Is there anything about your school or ELA experiences that you want to say that you have not had a chance to say?

Interview Two

• In just a few words, how would you sum up your experience in ELA classes at our school?
• What have you liked/disliked about our ELA class? (either as a 6th grader or 7th grader) Explain.
• Do you feel like your 7th grade ELA class has been different than your 6th grade class? If so, in what ways does it seem different?
• If you do recognize differences, will you explain how the differences have either enhanced your learning experience or hindered it?
• What in particular did you think about ________________? (This question will ask about the most recent assignments, assessments, projects?)
• Do you feel that any of the lessons/engagements we did in 7th grade drew on your interests or the language you use in your personal life?
• If so, can you describe one or two of those lessons? How would you rate your learning during those lessons on a scale of 1-5 (1 being minimal learning, 5 being optimal learning)?
• How did you feel as a reader and writer in our 7th grade class? Can you describe a time (in class, out of class) that you felt that way?
• What class engagements made you feel like a good reader/writer? What class engagements made you feel that reading and writing was difficult?
• Was there anything that you felt was too easy or too difficult in our 7th grade ELA class? Could you explain why?

• Is there anything about your school or ELA experiences that you want to say that you have not had a chance to say?

**Interview Three** (Questions 2-5 are repeated from the second interview to capture any new thinking about the most recent lessons/engagements.)

• As a 7th grader, what was the lesson/engagement/activity that most stands out in your memory of ELA class? Why do you think that was the lesson/engagement/activity that stands out in your memory?

• What in particular did you think about _________________? (This question will ask about the most recent assignments, assessments, projects?)

• Do you feel that any of the lessons/engagements we did in 7th grade drew on your interests or the language you use in your personal life?

• If so, can you describe one or two of those lessons? How would you rate your learning during those lessons on a scale of 1-5 (1 being minimal learning, 5 being optimal learning)?

• How did you feel as a reader and writer in our 7th grade class? Can you describe a time (in class, out of class) that you felt that way?

• In what ways do you feel that you grew as a reader or writer in 7th grade? Can you recall and describe any specific lessons or activities that contributed to your growth as a reader or writer?

• Will you describe anything that you felt was challenging about 7th grade ELA?
• Is there anything about your school or ELA experiences that you want to say that you have not had a chance to say?
Appendix B: Coding Tree

I. Lived Curriculum

A. Instructional Moves and Students’ Response

1. Drew on students’ lives and interests

   a. Focused on language

      i. Language at Home

         a. Student Response: expected home language
to sound different and include different
words and expressions

         b. Student Response: did not/would not
complete assignment

      ii. Language in media (sports coverage)

         a. Student Response: discussion about tone and
mood of interviewer and athlete

      iii. Formal Language

         a. Student Response: silent while watching
video of MLK’s “I Have a Dream”

   iv. Language Between Friends

      a. Student Response: reenacting the television
clip we viewed during discussion

b. Argument Writing
i. Student Response: all voices heard in their small
group discussions, students move from sitting at
table to standing around writer

ii. Rap music
   a. Student Response: discussion about rappers
      leads to a debate among boys about what
      rappers write about
   b. Student Response: watched Eminem
      interview quietly, occasional laughter, most
      forgot to take notes
   c. Connections to Athletics
      i. Establishing classroom norms
         a. Student Response: succeeded in creating
            norms, one student makes fun of another
            during this process
      ii. Mentor texts based on sports
         a. Student Response: Marcus makes a
            connection, other students are mimicking
            basketball play
      iii. Competitive Play
         a. Darts with sentence types
            1) Student Response: Jared emerges as
               leader to help organize the game
2) Student Response: students are very active with lots of movement around the room and joking with each other about their abilities to hit the bulls eye.

b. Tips with affixes

1) Student Response: All students involved in the game; some arguments about how to play.

2. Relied on classroom community

a. Class creed

i. Student Response: Initial reading of whole creed was flat, some opted to just stand and not participate; changed to choral response and all participated.

ii. Student Response: memorized

b. Support for Learning

i. Student groupings did not always work, some behavior problems with certain group arrangements.

ii. Student partners could work—Marcus and Jared as an example.

c. Non-academic activity
i. Student Response: students engaged in conversation and activity with ease

3. Brought race and cultural background into curriculum
   a. Language
      i. Richard Sherman interview
         a. Student Response: Focused only on the interaction between Sherman and Crabtree
         b. Student Response: Engaged in discussion about his language and Andrew’s response
   b. Texts
      i. Student Response: Some students engaged in discussion
   c. Challenging stereotypes
      i. Myth Project
         a. Student Response: Eagerly engaged in initial conversations about myths, multiple voices

II. Individual Student Responses
A. Jared
   1. Demonstrated understanding and excitement about his learning
   2. Seemed to believe that I cared about him
   3. Seemed to believe I created curriculum based on his interests
   4. Seemed to feel that he belonged in our classroom community
   5. Explored his understanding of race
6. Considered how the world perceives him and how he wanted to respond

B. Marcus

1. Responded when curriculum drew on his interests

2. Seemed to be supported by classroom community

3. Aware of impact of race